

箕崎准

大熊猫介

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Illustration

ヴァリアント覚醒

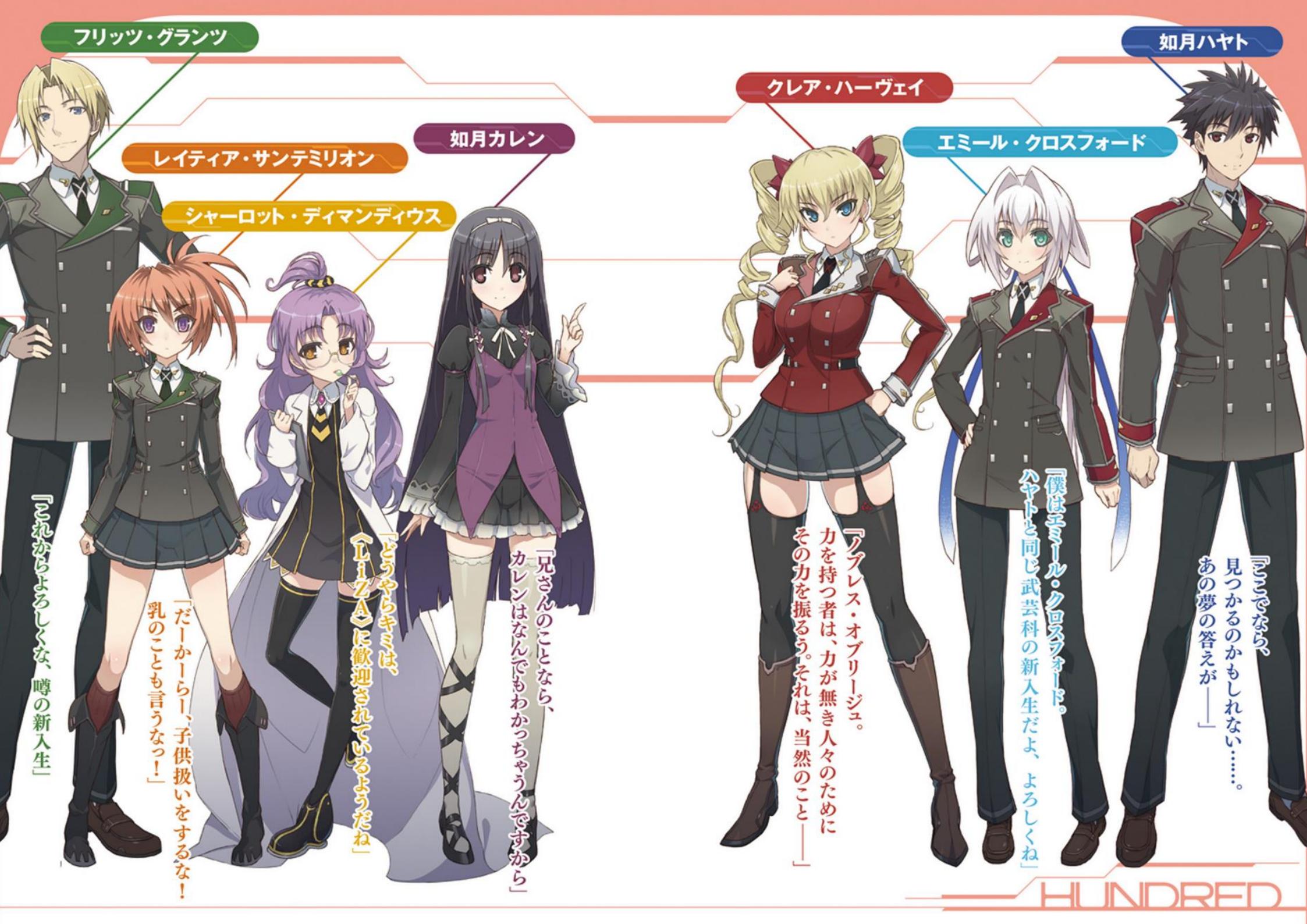
Hundred : Awakening of the Variant

ペリヴィ [Perivvy]



ヴァリアント覚醒

hundred
Hundred: Awakening of the Variant



フリッツ・グランツ

如月ハヤト

レイティア・サンテミリオン

如月カレン

クレア・ハーヴェイ

エミール・クロスフォード

シャーロット・ディマンディウス

『これからよろしくな、噂の新人生』

『だーかーらー、子供扱いをするな！
乳のことも言うなっ！』

『どうやらキミは、
「Liza」に歓迎されているようだね』

『兄さんのことなら、
カレンはなんでもわかつちゃうんですから』

『アブレス・オブリージュ。
力を持つ者は、力が無き人々のために
その力を振るう。それは、当然のこと』

『僕はエミール・クロスフォード。
ハヤトと同じ武芸科の新入生だよ、よろしくね』

『うーでもう、
見つかるのかもしれない……。
あの夢の答えが』

HUNDRED



如月ハヤト!
あなた、ど、を触ってしまふの!
あ、



ハンドレッド

触れた人間によって様々な武器の形状に変化することから、百武装——ハンドレッドと名付けられた特殊な石。武芸者と呼ばれる、特別な者だけが使用出来る。地球上に落下した隕石から削り出された「ヴァリアブルストーン」と呼ばれる赤い鉱石が原材料。



サベージ

南極大陸に落下した巨大な隕石と共に、宇宙の彼方より飛来した、人類を襲う謎の異種生命体。鋼のように硬い皮膚と、黄色い模様。ギロリと動く大きな目に、触角、鋭い牙に多くの脚を持ち、腕には巨大なハサミを持つ、昆虫のような姿形をしている。



第一次遭遇(ファーストアタック)

宇宙より飛来した巨大な隕石が南極に落下すると共にサベージが現れた事件のこと。その際に人類によって殲滅されたと思われていたが、それから三年後に再びサベージが出現する、「第二次遭遇(セカンドアタック)」が起きてしまう。

海上学園都市艦リトルガーデン

対侵略者(サベージ)用の拠点として、武装兵器、ハンドレッドの研究開発と、それを用いて戦う武芸者の育成のために、開発、製造され、運用されている、自走式の巨大空母。全長4000m、全幅1000m。「ターミナル区画」、「ミリタリー区画」、「ファミリー区画」の三つに分かれている。

リトルガーデン生徒会

リトルガーデンの初等部、中等部、高等部普通科、武芸者を育成するための高等部武芸科、全ての学生を束ねる事実上の最高権力機関。代表はクレア・ハーヴェイ。

ヴァリアブルスーツ

武芸者がサベージとの抗戦の際に着用するスーツ。ハンドレッドの元となるヴァリアブルストーンが繊維の中に混ぜ込まれており、ハンドレッドと同じように、エナジーに反応して形状が変化する。



センスエナジー

武芸者の身体から放たれる微粒子状の物質。これに反応してハンドレッドは形状が変化する。通称エナジー。

武芸者(スレイヤー)

ハンドレッドを用いてサベージと戦う者を指す。なお、ハンドレッドは隕石落下時に第二次性微を迎えていなかった、限られた者にしか反応しないため、その構成は学生をはじめとした子供たちが中心である。

PDA(Private Digital Assistant)

海上学園都市艦リトルガーデンで暮らす全ての者が所有している薄型の携帯端末。身分証明証にもなる。

CHARACTER



如月ハヤト

武芸科一年。皇国ヤマト出身。
歴代第一位の
ハンドレッド反応数値を持つ新入生。



エミール・クロスフォード

武芸科一年。ブリタニア帝国出身。
ハヤトのルームメイト。
その実力はかなりのもの？



クレア・ハーヴェイ

武芸科三年。リベリア合衆国出身。
リトルガーデンの艦長であり、
学生全てを束ねる生徒会長。



如月カレン

ハヤトの妹。幼い頃から病気がち
であり、現在はリトルガーデン内の
施設に入院している。



レイティア・サンテミリオン

武芸科一年。リベリア合衆国出身。
フリッツの幼馴染み。



フリッツ・グランツ

武芸科一年。リベリア合衆国出身。
武芸科男子寮の一年生代表。



リディ・斯坦バーグ

武芸科二年。リベリア合衆国出身。
リトルガーデン生徒会・副会長の一人。
生徒会、選抜隊に誇りを持っている。



エリカ・キャンドル

武芸科二年。リベリア合衆国出身。
リトルガーデン生徒会・副会長の一人。
クレアに対して崇拜にも近い感情を抱く。

柏木ミハル

カレンの担当看護士。

シャーロット・

ディマンディウス

リトルガーデンの技術主任。

メイメイ

シャーロットの助手。

クリス・シュタインベルト

中等部二年。リトルガーデンの若き主任戦略分析官。



CHARACTER

Prologue

“Why? Why is this happening?! This is too much—”

In this town, old-fashioned buildings like churches and temples stood alongside modern skyscrapers. The sight of happy tourists sightseeing, churchgoers attending morning worship, and people joyfully going about their daily activities gave off the most peaceful feeling.

And yet...

The blinding flash of a brilliant beam coupled with a jarring, concussive blast transformed this idyllic scene into a bloody, nightmarish hell.

Nor was it over. The beam heedlessly, ceaselessly raked the area over, and explosive sounds continued without interruption.

The innards of the buildings in the area were exposed. They hardly had a chance to serve their intended purpose; construction had only just recently finished. Now that work was wasted; they were practically unrecognizable in their current state, all hint of their original forms was but a memory.

Those were the lucky ones. The majority of buildings had been reduced to a state worse than rubble—swirling whirlwinds of dust which collected on the fallen ruins of their brethren.

Explosion followed explosion, never pausing.

“Wh-What?! Wh-What’s going on?! What the hell is going on?!” a boy screamed, crouching slightly.

What’s happening to this town?! I don’t understand!

Nor was he alone in his ignorance and incomprehension; all around people pondered the same questions. ‘Is it terrorists? An accident? Or maybe—’ their terrified imaginations filling in the blanks. Screaming, panicking, and running to and fro, the townspeople sought salvation.

An explosion rocked the area the boy was in.

“Uwaaa?!”

A gust of air, displaced by the impact of the blast, struck the boy, sending him flying.

Why?! Why is this...?!

But seconds later, the boy, struggling to rise to his feet amidst the fallen rubble, caught sight of huge monsters covered in shining, yellow patterns.

“No way, are they—”

A memory rose; unbidden in his mind. Three years ago, along with a number of tiny meteorites from some distant corner of the universe, a mysterious, heterogeneous life-form had made their way to Earth—the ‘Savage’.

Utterly unlike humanity in that their skin was tough as steel and covered in shining, yellow patterns, they nevertheless possessed the ability to communicate with one another. They boasted long antennae, sharp, glaring eyes, blade-like talons on their feet, and enormous, pincered limbs in place of hands—bearing overall, a strange resemblance to insects. The monsters before his eyes were none other than these selfsame Savage.

Because of the Savage, humanity had finally reconciled, and the UN had formed an alliance. In cooperation with the PMCs of the world, they had ‘annihilated’ the Savage in the Antarctic.

—So, how could they possibly be here?

His body trembled in fear.

He'd heard many times from many people—his teachers, his parents, everyone, really—of the terror and dread of the Savage.

It was truly terrifying. Fear was the only possible response. His legs threatened to give way at any moment.

Nevertheless, he shook off his fear, and began to run.

He had, after all, made a most important promise.

He needed to go *there*.

He finally arrived at the park located at the heart of the town.

It had always been a lively and crowded place; today, it was empty. More than likely, everyone had fled to safety in the wake of the Savage attack. Silence now reigned here.

The park's sole occupant was a beautiful girl, with silver hair and a lovely dress. There she waited on the promised bench as if nothing had happened.

She was fast asleep, breathing lightly.

The locale was more than suitable for an afternoon nap; perhaps she had dozed off?

Her sleeping visage was both serene and charming. He wanted nothing more than to sit down beside her and watch her sleep, but now was not the time for such things.

“Get up!”

The boy raced to the girl's side, shook her body, and called out to her.

“Ah, you finally made it...”

The girl stirred, smiling gently. She quickly sensed something awry in the boy's expression.

“...What's wrong?”

“We've got a huge problem! The Savage have appeared!”

Suddenly, they were enveloped in darkness: shadows. The Savage!

“We need to move!”

The boy took the perplexed girl's hand in his own and began to run.

One airborne Savage suddenly landed immediately in front of them.

The ground quaked and water overflowed from the park's pond.

“...Damn it!”

Enemies both in front and behind.

Furthermore, these Savage were enormous—their size comparable to that of a house. Some measured three, even four meters in height.

The oppressive feeling threatened to overwhelm them.

As the boy and the girl picked themselves back up, the creature before them glared at the sight. Raising its pincers high above its head, it prepared to attack.

—*We need to get out of here, now!*

“This way!”

The boy pulled the girl's hand, drawing her to him and kicking up dirt.

The Savage missed.

Its attack pierced through the ground instead, throwing up a violent cloud of dust. Suddenly the boy's arm was jerked from behind.

“Gaa—?!”

As the grip on his hand was released, a scream filled his ears. He turned to see the girl collapsed on the ground.

Her leg had gotten caught on the rubble, and she'd tripped.

“Are you alright—?”

“Y-Yeah... I'm okay...” she answered, trying to pull herself up.

The boy noticed the head of a Savage popping up over the tops of the foliage behind them. White light began to gather there.

This is bad!

The boy knew that the Savage could fire some kind of beam from their head. The explosions ringing out until now had all been caused by this, after all.

“Get down—!”

He threw himself to the ground alongside the girl. Seconds later, the beam fired, dyeing the world in white.

“Uaaah...!”

A roar sounded, and the resulting shockwave kicked up fragments of rubble, clouds of dust, and other things into a vicious swirl.

The boy was blown away.

His body crashed into a piece of rubble and came to a hard stop.

The girl had also been blown away. Her body rolled and rolled until it came to rest at the feet of another Savage.

The Savage became aware of the girl’s existence, and targeted its new prey. Its pincered claws extended in length. The boy realized it was reaching out to grab the girl.

“STOOOOOOOP!”

A heart-rending scream tore itself free of the boy’s throat.

He knew that humans were but prey before the Savage.

Caught in the Savage’s grip, the girl’s feet were lifted clean off the ground as her body was lifted into the air.

The girl’s body hung suspended in the air as the Savage’s mouth gaped wide.

What do I do?!

—BAAM—!

Suddenly, the sound of artillery fire could be heard. An explosion rocked the approaching Savage’s head. The line of fire could be traced to a tank belonging to the Good Morning Army. The military had come!

The girl fell out of the hands of the targeted Savage.

Oh...

He raced to the side of the girl, who'd fallen atop a pile of rubble. Blood drained from his face as he caught sight of her.

She gasped painfully for air. Her dress was torn where the Savage's pincers had cut her. The opening allowed him to see a single line of red running down her skin. The pincered hands of her attacker had scarred her lovely white skin.

"Hey, are you alright?!"

Calling out to her in vain, he received no reply. The girl continued to cry out in pain, the hazy sounds of her voice leaked from her throat.

Dark, polluted blood seeped fresh from her wound.

Shit, I've gotta stop the bleeding, or else...

His first priority, however, was to escape the current situation. Now that the Savage's attention was on the army, they had forgotten about the boy and the girl. If there was a time to escape, it was now.

The boy took the girl in his arms and ran from the scene with all his might.

"Things should be alright now that we're this far..."

The boy's legs had given out about five minutes after leaving the Savage behind. The surrounding buildings had been left in ruin and there was nary a soul in sight.

"Sorry, this might hurt a little..."

With those words, he sat down on a large slab of concrete. He carefully laid the girl down on as smooth and flat a spot as he could find.

"Uuuh, ha... nnnaaah..."

A pained voice leaked from her mouth.

Her breathing was shallow and her forehead drenched in sweat.

"...What... What is this...?"

The boy had noticed something strange. His gaze froze on the area where her dress had torn and revealed the wound on her chest. With the wound as a focal point, the surrounding skin had darkened noticeably. It felt to him as if the darkness was even now spreading, encroaching upon her body.

Is it... some kind of poison...?

He recalled a time when he had been stung by a bee. His mother had given him the following treatment: tying off the circulation to his arm, she'd proceeded to suck the poison out with her mouth.

This time, however, the wound was on her chest; he couldn't exactly follow the same process. He nevertheless decided that the poison, at least, must be drawn from the wound.

From the wound, he'd...

From someone else's— More importantly, how could he touch his lips to a girl's body? Such a thing was well beyond his experience.

The mere thought had thrown off his breathing, sped up his heart rate, and dried out his mouth.

This was the boy's first time experiencing such feelings. Was it really okay to do this of his own volition? He briefly entertained such thoughts before he concluded that circumstances did not allow him the luxury of inaction.

Sorry—!

Apologizing in his mind, the boy lowered his lips to the girl's wounded chest and began to suck.

“Nnn... fuuaa... nnn...”

Desperately, he drew the poison out with his pursed lips.

The taste of iron ran strongly in his mouth, but it was coupled with a strange, lighter taste.

“Nn—haaa!”

spit.

He spat the darkened blood out of his mouth. It stuck firmly to the concrete.

Having cast aside his anxiety with the first go, he determined there was no need for fear. Once more he drew the blood from the girl's body, and once more he spat it out. Twice, thrice he repeated this simple action.

"Kaha, keho... Nnn, keho..."

On the third try, the boy choked as he spat out the tainted blood he held in his mouth.

But—

"Thank... you..."

The girl in his arms smiled at him, and he smiled at her in turn, showing his relief.

Suddenly, things changed.

What's going on? What's...

What had been clear to his eyes mere moments prior suddenly faded into a hazy blur as his head began to spin.

Squinting didn't fix it.

Damn it; what's going on?!

His head grew heavy, and his body was unwilling drawn to the ground.

His consciousness slipped for a brief moment. As with his vision, his thoughts began to cloud over.

Is this... the poison...?

Despite his failing consciousness, the boy's face yet expressed his frustration.

The Savage's poison had been far more potent than he'd expected.

There was a silver lining in this cloud, however; the girl's symptoms seemed to have ceased.

At least she'd make it, or so he desperately hoped.

But as for himself? The boy readied himself for death. A distant voice echoed in his ears. A hallucination, this was not.

No, it was unmistakably a man's voice. He heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

Someone... came to help...?

In that case, not just the girl, but possibly he himself might yet be saved.

That'd be great. Just as he dared to hope for salvation—

“Eh...?”

He felt a dull sense of pain on the back of his head; his brain rattled in his skull.

He staggered.

A forceful impact ran throughout his body shortly thereafter.

What... was... that... just... now...?

It seemed as if he'd been struck from behind with some kind of blunt weapon.

That said, he had no way of knowing what it truly was.

...But, no... Why...?

A voice screamed his name—the voice of the girl, which slowly faded into oblivion.

The boy's consciousness had long since faded.

Chapter 1: Little Garden/Bugeika/School Entrance Ceremony

Mh, mmhh...

Bathed in sunlight, Kisaragi Hayato opened his eyes.

The sounds of a reciprocating engine and rotating propellers reached his ears.

“We’ll be arriving shortly,” reported the pilot.

The transport had already begun landing preparations.

I dreamt of that girl again, huh...

It was a dream of himself and another having suffered in a Savage attack while in the Gutenberg Kingdom of the Britannia Commonwealth. He’d often seen this dream since he had been a child.

I wonder if that really happened... Hayato thought.

He had, after all, indeed been the victim of a Savage attack in the Gutenberg Kingdom in the past. There, among other things, he had lost his parents, injured his head, and fallen into a coma.

In his weakened state, he had lost most of his memories of his time in Gutenberg, though he wasn’t sure if the attack was the direct cause. Had the full events of the dream been revealed, or was there more to see? Was the incident even real? Even now, he had no way of knowing.

Either way, that sure looked like a close call...

Originally, he’d planned to arrive at the massive aircraft carrier ‘Little Garden’ yesterday evening, but weather problems and other things had come up. Exiting the country had thus taken longer than expected, and his arrival had now been delayed to the very day of the school entrance ceremony.

Given his lateness, he wondered whether he would have the time to visit his little sister, Karen, who was hospitalized, upon his arrival.

He glanced outside the window, seeing only ocean.

Nonetheless, the aforementioned destination, Little Garden, was out there somewhere.

Its training facility housed a crystal which would alter its form when touched by a human. This so-called 'Variable Stone' would then reveal the creation of a weapon worn on the arms— Hyaku Busou^[1], also colloquially referred to as a 'Hundred'. There, Hayato would be armed with this Hundred and receive training to become a Slayer dedicated to fighting the Savage.

He would fight for his sister, whose body had been weakened by illness from the time she was young, to receive better medical treatment.

At the facility, now his new home, he would also fight to protect his fellow comrades from the fate he'd experienced: losing parents to the Savage and a life of poverty.

At that moment—

He looked through the window a second time, finally catching a glimpse of the elusive Little Garden.

If we can arrive without further trouble, there'll be still some time left until the school entrance ceremony. I'll be able to visit my sister, even if just for a bit!

So this is it, huh? Little Garden...

With the exception of the harbor section^[2] which held its runway, Little Garden was encased in airtight, mirrored glass, giving it the appearance of a long, narrow trapezoid. The design made it impossible to peer inside. Despite how it looked, however, an ordinary town could be found within with residence openings so scarce, they had to be assigned.

I wonder if I'll find it here...

The answer to his question—

The true identity of the girl in his dream.

Now that I think about it, ever since my sister and I came into contact with the Hundred, my memories have been gradually returning, so I guess it's just a matter of time.

If he touched a Hundred again, those memories from long ago just might be restored. This hope he secretly held in his heart.

The transport began to lower its altitude, and started to circle the skies above Little Garden.

Only ten minutes later, Kisaragi Hayato set foot upon Little Garden.

※※※

“Nii-san, you haven’t tied your necktie properly, you know...”

The girl, whose raven black hair stood in stark contrast to the hospital’s white walls, pointed this out as she raised her upper body from the bed.

Her name was Kisaragi Karen.

Though she had a good complexion and otherwise seemed quite hale, her life in the hospital hadn’t given her skin much exposure to the sunlight, leaving it snow-white and clear.

“It can’t be helped, right? I’ve never had to tie one of these before,” Hayato sulked as his sister reached out her arms.

“Please, come a bit closer. I’ll fix the knot for you.”

“It’s fine; it’s good enough already.”

“That’s no good. Knowing that Nii-san is a slob is already unpleasant enough, but you must at least do it properly for the school entrance ceremony. So, *please* come a bit closer.”

Her tone was gentle, but her eyebrows were raised. Hayato knew that when Karen was like this, she could be quite stubborn.

“...Yeah, got it.”

Deciding it couldn't be helped, Hayato brought himself closer. She unfastened his necktie and began to retie it.

“There, problem solved...” she said, her face beaming in satisfaction.



He checked in the mirror and it had been tied exceptionally well. It hadn't even taken a minute, yet the knot had taken its proper shape.

"You're quite good at this. I'm a bit surprised, you know?"

"It's because I researched how to tie a knot before Nii-san came. I was thinking, 'I guess it won't be tied neatly, anyway,' so..."

"Anyway', huh? You..."

"I was right, wasn't I? When it comes to Nii-san, there's nothing I don't know."

Karen bared her feelings with a smile and presented her forehead.

Whenever Karen wanted praise, demanded an apology, or other things of that nature, she would demand a kiss in this manner. If he refused, she'd sulk—not something he wanted. Though, she would eventually cheer up, that'd take time he didn't have right now. In other words, refusal wasn't an option.

"Seriously, this girl's a hopeless case..."

Even while sighing in exaggerated astonishment, he nevertheless placed a hand on her long, black hair, held in place by a white hairband, and lightly touched her forehead for a brief moment with his lips.

"...Will that do?"

"Ehehe. This was the first kiss in a month, right?"

Karen smiled, satisfied. She'd likely be in good spirits for some time to come.

"Oh, that's right; how is everyone at the institution doing?"

"I think you know the answer to that already, right?"

Hayato turned his gaze toward the computer tablet that was placed near Karen's bedside. She accessed the cybernet with it and used it to communicate with everyone at the institution. Of course, Hayato was also aware of the fact that she played games on it as well.

“Looks like Nii-san found out...”

“Everyone happily reported how they’re playing games with Karen.”

“Uuh... Even though I told them not to tell Nii-san...”

“I know you feel isolated and lonely, but it’s no good if you don’t study, you know? If you keep this up, and the time comes when you can attend school, you’ll be in quite a bit of trouble.”

“I know that, but...”

“Your reply?”

“Yeees...” Karen answered energetically.

At the same time a knocking sound echoed throughout the room followed by a woman’s voice coming from the other side of the door.

“Karen-chan, is it okay if I come in?”

“Yes, it’s fine,” was Karen’s friendly reply.

The door groaned and opened.

“Ara, could you perhaps be Karen’s Onii-san?”

A woman dressed in a white gown and nurse’s cap with a small mole under her eye came into the room, pushing a medical cart before her.

She had long, black hair and, unlike Karen, a curvaceous figure. Her appearance resembled Hayato and his sister, as if she, too, was from Yamato.

“This is the nurse I’m indebted so much to. Nii-san, please greet her properly and introduce yourself.”

“I’m Kisaragi Hayato. I’m in your debt for caring for my sister.”

Hayato bowed his head, greeting her in accordance with Karen’s urging. The nurse smiled in response.

“Karen-chan speaks about you quite often. Always saying about what a cool Onii-san you are.”

“Ah, not at all...”

His mind went blank. What should he say to such a beautiful and voluptuous woman...

“Nii-san, looking at Miharu’s breasts and turning all ‘deredere’... Ecchi...”

“I didn’t!”

He instantly objected, but the *breasts* of the nurse in front of his eyes were in fact considerably large. As a man, he couldn’t help it if his gaze was unwillingly captivated by such a sight. On that point, when it came to Karen, however... ‘too bad’ was all that came to mind.

“Ufufu, just as Karen-chan said, I’m a nurse of this hospital. Kashiwagi Miharu. I was also born in Yamato, the same empire Hayato-kun and Karen-chan come from, and so I was asked to watch over Karen-chan.”

“...How’s she doing?”

Her being in charge of Karen mattered much more to Hayato than her being from Yamato. He’d often heard about his little sister’s condition from the person in question, but he had no way of knowing how much of it was true.

“Well, she’s here now, so she’ll definitely get better. It might seem just like a small step, but she’s able to walk now. If progress keeps up during rehab, before you know it, she’ll be attending school.”

Her words filled him with a sense of relief.

“I see. That’s great...”

Karen’s illness caused abnormalities in her muscle function.

The Savage had appeared alongside a huge meteorite which had struck the South Pole. The spread of this illness began shortly after this incident, which later came to be known as the ‘First Attack’. The current methods of treatment hadn’t yet been created at that time, and stricken by illness, Karen had thus never before attended school. It was only recently that she’d escaped the confines of her wheelchair.

If she were able to walk again—something that no longer seemed all that far off—she could finally attend school. One could say that this was all thanks to having come to Little Garden.

“...Interrupting siblings that surely want to be alone after they haven’t seen each other for so long isn’t preferable, but we haven’t had a meeting today, right? We just need to do a few, small examinations.”

“Actually, I have to get going anyway. The school entrance ceremony will be starting soon.”

“That would make today the Bugeika’s^[3] school entrance ceremony, right?”
“Yet, I can barely get there in time...”

With a wry smile, he lifted his travel bag from the bed. Suddenly, Karen’s mood turned serious.

“Nii-san, I’m really grateful for everything.”

“What’s this all of a sudden...”

“But— You see, because of me, Nii-san had to come here. Even if you’re bound to catch some ferocious glares because of it...”

“You’re worrying about those kinds of things? Just focus on getting better. Also, that’s not my only reason for coming here, okay? It’s also because of the facility.”

Chuckling, Hayato petted Karen’s head.

“Nii-san will stay safe, no matter what. I’m diligently praying for you every day.”

“‘Praying’, is it? Could you please stop with strange stuff like black-magic?”

“It’s white-magic, so it’s fine.”

“That’s close enough, isn’t it? That kind of thing...”

Karen had gone through a phase where she’d obsessed over the occult while searching for a cure for her illness. She had acquired considerable knowledge of black magic, fortune telling, and other things of that nature.

...When it came to results, however, that was a different matter. On that point, even when it came to fortune telling, there hadn't been any success stories. No, when it came to black magic and other such experiments, they were an annoyance better left alone.

"Ehehe, I'm just joking. I just pray for Nii-san to be safe, nothing else."

"Alright then, I better go."

"...Nii-san, if nothing gets in the way after my tests are over and the school entrance ceremony finishes, please come back. You see, there are still so many things I want to tell you..."

"Gotcha, I'll do just that."

Saying that, Hayato put his hand on the door. Once more, Karen's voice could be heard from behind.

"Nii-san, have a safe trip."

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"All this atop an aircraft carrier; it's pretty hard to believe..." Hayato murmured as he left the hospital.

Looking up toward the sky, he saw mirrored glass, something he hadn't even known existed.

In fact, were it not for the strong, salty smell of ocean water in the air, he might very well have forgotten he was now at sea.

The university battleship, Little Garden--

Boasting a surface area of more than four square kilometers, a town atop an aircraft carrier.

Simply by scale alone, one could scour the entire world and not find its equal.

In order to preserve its freedom, Little Garden never stopped sailing. For something of this scale, this was undoubtedly a world's first.

This ship wasn't attached to any nation.

Little Garden had its headquarters in the federal state of Liberia, where the production company responsible for developing fighters, military ships, and so on, was located. Even though the Warslan company was a PMC^[4], they had built Little Garden themselves to serve as a base both for battling the Savage and for the research and development of the Hundred weapon. For the sake of training Slayers—those who wielded the Hundred—no expense was spared when it came to this huge aircraft carrier. That rationale had manifested itself in every aspect of its design.

“So that's the dorm, huh...?”

The scene reflected in his eyes was of a refined, white, two-storied Western building. There were no other structures in the vicinity, so its appearance was somewhat reminiscent of an airport. Hayato stepped forward, onto the grounds.

All became clear at the entrance to the dorm.

A decorated plate, proudly emblazoned with the emblem of Little Garden Bugeika, was displayed on the wall in front of his eyes.

There was no mistaking it.

“Excuse my intrusion...” he called out as he opened the door, a spacious foyer entered his vision.

He saw a spacious lobby with a sofa, a large table, and other such things within. The students could well socialize here. It also seemed to be a good place to eat.

It was, however, currently empty.

“...Errr, is anyone here?” Hayato asked, when suddenly—

“HAYATO—!”

“...Eh?”

A loud voice resounded through the lobby as the sounds of footsteps drew near.

“I’ve wanted to meet you, Hayato—!”

“Uwaaa?!”

Someone from inside the corridor suddenly leapt at him.



Hayato attempted to dodge, but with his travel bag in his hands, he couldn't make it in time...

CRASH!

Hit with great force, he fell onto the carpet.

"Ouch! What's wrong with you?! That hurts...!"

Complaining, he looked up at the figure now lying on top of him.

Crystal-clear, white skin and blue eyes.

Well-groomed, captivating features and charming, silver hair beautifully tied with a ribbon. A surprisingly slender and soft physique.

...Is this person a girl?

Countering his impression, the uniform of the person in question rejected that thought. This person appeared to belong to the same Bugeika as Hayato.

It's a guy after all, isn't it? Hayato corrected himself. *And quite a strange one to boot. That hurt; just what was he thinking?!*

Just as he was about to comment, "You, that really—"

"I'm Emil Crossford from the Gutenberg Kingdom of the Britannia Commonwealth, like Hayato. I'm a freshman of the Bugeika. It's nice to meet you, okay?"

The newcomer leaned in and introduced himself with a smile, and caused Hayato's heart rate to shoot up.

That guy's smile; he remembered it from *somewhere*.

"..."

Motionless, Hayato continued to stare.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing." *Because you were so forceful, I...* he silently thought to himself. "Errr, I—"

Still stunned, he tried to gather his thoughts and offer his own greeting in turn when he was struck by a sudden realization.

“Now that I think about it, you, how do you know my name?”

“bout that, Kisaragi Hayato’s a famous guy.”

“Famous, you say...?”

“Ermm, that is, you see—”

“Before we get to that, mind getting off of me first?”

Hayato, who’d cut in, still had Emil lying on top of him. Even if this was for the purpose of something like male bonding—— Actually, strike that, keeping a posture like this for that reason was pretty bad itself. It invited needless misunderstandings.

“Aah, sorry!”

Flustered, Emil attempted to rise.

Suddenly, a cheerful voice mixed with laughter interrupted them.

“Hey, you guys. Flirting and getting all intimate here, are we?”

Turning his gaze to the owner of the voice, he saw a tall, young man with short, blonde hair standing there with a scandalized smile on his face.

“No, this so called flirting... It’s nothing like that, alright? This guy suddenly came clinging onto me!”

“Yeah, that’s because this person ‘really, really’ wanted to meet you, you see.”

The young man who spoke was wearing an obviously new male Bugeika uniform like Emil.

“Are you a freshman too?” Hayato asked.

The blonde youth answered with a nod.

“That’s right, I’m Fritz Glanz. I was the first to arrive at this men’s dormitory, so, even if just temporarily, I am the leader of the freshmen. With that said, I’ll be in your care from now on, rumored freshman.”

“R-Right... Same here...”

Taking Fritz’s outstretched hand, Hayato rose with his help.

“That’s nice, isn’t it? The two of you, shaking hands like that. I want to shake Hayato’s hand too!”

“I’m already up so there’s no need for anything like that...”

This was neither the time nor the place for such trivialities. Rather than that, there was something else he should worry about.

“Moments ago, this guy mentioned this as well; what’s this rumor about me?” Hayato asked, turning his head to indicate to Emil.

Fritz nodded with an audible “Ah”.

“I got here the day before yesterday, so I heard the whole thing. The expectations for the new student shot through the roof the moment he placed first in the successive generation’s reaction reading during the Hundred aptitude test.”

“So, the rumors are about that...”

With that, Hayato understood.

Something had been measured at the time Hayato had taken the aptitude test which Fritz had just mentioned. The reading had been astonishingly high; a fact Hayato was more aware of than anyone else.

It had been thanks to that reading that Hayato had received such a warm welcome from Little Garden’s Bugeika.

And a warm welcome it was, for not only was his tuition waived, but he’d even been provided additional scholarship support. His sister, who was frequently hospitalized as a result of her weakened condition, was now being treated by the world’s foremost medical team under the direction of the Warslan group; this benefit, was similarly free of charge.

Even if I haven't the slightest idea why they would be so generous...

Throughout the world, those who had the aim of becoming a Slayer would study the Hundred and other related matters. In order to deepen their knowledge on these topics, a training school had been created.

However, unlike someone who had studied at that training school, Hayato had touched the Hundred during the school enrollment test not more than twice— While he had been studying about the Savage on his own long before arriving at Little Garden, when compared to those who had attended the training school, he was severely lacking when it came to technique and knowledge.

This alone made the rumor seem like much ado about nothing, and having such a degree of expectation placed upon his shoulders worried him.

“...Well, that’s how it is. Now I’ll lead you guys to your assigned room! That’s the duty of the freshmen leader! You two are the only ones left who haven’t been shown to their rooms yet!”

Saying that, Fritz walked off.

“Hayato, let’s go.”

“R-Right.”

Hayato took the travel bag that was lying on the floor, and trailing Emil and Fritz, started up the stairs.

Only the men of the Bugeika lived in this dorm and so it wasn’t all that spacious.

To begin with, only one third of the students were middle and high schoolers of the Bugeika, and even the male and female counts combined did not amount to more than 30 freshmen.

As Hayato had come to learn, while the Bugeika was technically part of the Little Garden High School, they were heavily influenced by public authorities. It was a fact that Slayers belonged to the Warslan Company as

apprentices— beginning their service as preparatory-department students. It went without saying that entrance required graduation from middle school. Even though the school curriculum was special, it used the same three year system as the Futsuuka^[5], and the majority of people that graduated then belonged to a private military company managed by the Warslan Company as mercenaries. Guarding VIP personnel and facilities, disaster relief, and other such things; those were the kinds of duties expected of them.

Of all of those, their most important duty by far would be to fight the 'Savage'.

It's said that the Savage first came to Earth via a huge meteorite.

At that time, people had incorrectly assumed it would simply burn up in the atmosphere. Contrary to expectations, however, it had, instead, splintered into tiny meteorites to which the Savage had clung. These had subsequently then showered the surface. The Savage carried by them then fled to the ocean to prolong their survival. After incubating for several years, they emerged once more and began to rampage.

It's further been said that they had reached their considerable numbers by breeding, and moreover, it appeared that a new batch of them had also been discovered, flying toward the Earth via meteorite, once again.

In the beginning, there hadn't been any attempts made as to calculate their numbers during the first attack when they first dropped onto the Earth aboard their fragments of the once enormous meteorite. The appearance of the Savage themselves could best be described as 'insect-like', though to be truthful, they were rather large and somewhat dissimilar in appearance. Their skin was as hard as steel, to the extent of being impervious to gunfire.

Accordingly, early resistance efforts had resorted to the use of gigantic landmines and air strikes. Though humanity had succeeded in forcing them to retreat time and again, they had never once managed to deal the finishing blow.

It was then that the 'Hyaku Busou', or 'Hundred', had been developed.

These were anti-Savage weapons.

While the first attack was ongoing, that is to say, when the splinters of the meteorite had first hit the Earth, scientists had become aware of a new material which transformed upon coming into contact with humans. The essential raw ingredient in its development was a red crystal harvested from those selfsame meteorites. This, they called 'Variable Stone'.

The Hundred, the fruits of those labors, were then utilized to fight the Savage. The children enrolled in this school were devoted to this endeavor.

The school was currently limited to those who had not yet reached puberty at the time the meteorite had fallen; the Hundred would respond for no other.

"And that's your room."

Fritz had pulled to a stop in front of the first corner room on the second floor.

"It's surprisingly spacious..." Hayato muttered, passing through the door Fritz had just opened.

It was bigger than any room Hayato had lived in since he had left his homeland, Yamato. The facility room he had shared with his sister had only been a scant, six tatami^[6] in size; in other words, not even half the size of this room.

"...Wait. Wait a sec, you said *our* room—"

Emil's gaze pointed toward the two installations in the room, single beds with a wide gap between them.

"As you can see, this is a double room."

"Which means that Hayato and I are in the same room?!"

"Bugeika's students are meant to fight the Savage in the near future; you know that much, right? You aren't alone at such times—you're organized into teams to fight. Cohabitation is meant to strengthen communication, or

at least that's what I've heard. I was taught that by the Senpai who led me to my room."

Fritz cheerfully patted Hayato's shoulder.

"Well, be good friends from here on, you magnificent two! When you're done unpacking, come to the lobby. I'll take you to the Bugeika school building."

"It can't be... Could Char have done something unnecessary and put us in the same room..." Emil, leaning on the wall, muttered after Fritz had left them alone.

"So that 'Char' you're talking about deliberately put us in the same room?"

"No, that's... Err, I wonder, huh? Might be a coincidence after all. Ahaha..." he said, forcing a smile.

"Anyway, please take care of me from today onward, Hayato."

"Y-Yeah..."

What a weirdo, Hayato thought, but it wasn't like he could deal with the situation by simply rejecting the roommate he was going to live with from today on.

Emil held out a hand which Hayato caught in a firm grasp.

"Ehehe..."

He positively glowed in response as if his heart's desire had finally come true.

Make that a super weirdo...

Thus, the curtain was drawn on Hayato's new life.

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"So that's the Bugeika school building, huh?"

After leaving their luggage in the room and walking a little more than ten minutes under Fritz's partial guidance, they finally arrived at the entrance.

"Rather than calling it a school, this looks almost more like some sort of research facility, I'd say. Or a hideout maybe?"

"I know what you mean..."

They were presented with a most formidable scene. It almost seemed to be a security checkpoint, with two guards keeping watch at the gate. The nondescript design, which featured hardly any windows, only served to further strengthen this impression.

"Hayato, do you have your PDA?"

"PDA, huh? That's this thing, right?"

In response to Emil's question, Hayato pulled a flat, card-like portable device, roughly the size of a standard business card, out of his pocket.

He'd been given it upon his arrival.

It not only served as both his student ID and general identification document, it also doubled as a communication device, including features such as mailing, calling, and etc. Moreover, it apparently could even double as a replacement for his wallet.

"It seems it also functions as a gate pass."

Emil placed his PDA against the sensor, whereupon the gate opened. *Quite intuitive. Yamato's train ticket barriers had a similar system.*

"Hayato, you too!"

From across the gate, Emil waved energetically. As prompted, Hayato and Fritz entered the premises as well.

After walking a short distance more, they finally arrived at their destination: the auditorium.

"You finally made it, huh? I was getting tired of waiting!"

Amid the vast throng of both new and old students and the teaching staff, a cheerful girl with boyish looks, her hair done up on the side, called out to them.

She was quite short with rather childish features, but a closer inspection revealed that she was wearing a proper Bugeika girls uniform. Her eyes burned with an unyielding spirit which made you forcefully aware of her strength of will.

“My bad, these guys took longer than expected to get ready,” Fritz replied with the ease of familiarity, casually pointing at Hayato and Emil with his thumb.

“Oooh, are you two freshmen too?!”

Looking at Hayato and Emil with sparkling eyes, the girl thumped her chest and introduced herself.

“I’m Reitia Santemirion, from the same federal state of Liberia as Fritz. This guy and I are acquaintances of sorts.”

“If you’re going to say that much, then just tell them we’re childhood friends already,” Fritz said in mock astonishment, ruffling Reitia’s hair with his hand.

“I’m always telling you *not* to touch my hair! Isn’t that right, Fritzard?!”

Reitia bared her teeth in a growl at Fritz, who was stirring her up by ruffling her hair.

“It’s not my fault your head happens to be at the perfect height.”

“Gununu^[7]...”

Reitia’s face wrinkled in frustration at Fritz’s unconcerned response.

Watching the two closely, Emil remarked, smiling, “You two are very close, right?”

“We’ve always been together since we were young. Unlike me, however, she doesn’t look like she’s grown at all. Hers are as small as before as well,”

Fritz answered, without a moment’s hesitation.

Without skipping a beat, Reitia protested in turn, “That. Is. Why. I. Said. Don’t treat me like a child! And don’t talk about my breasts! Anyway, now it’s your guys’ turn to introduce yourselves. I still haven’t heard your names.”

“I’ll introduce them then, I guess. The cute one here is Emil Crossford and the other is the rumored freshman, Kisaragi Hayato.”

“Oooh, so you’re the one who broke Claire-sama’s record, Kisaragi Hayato!”

“...Claire-sama?”

A question marked seemed to appear over Hayato’s head; he had no idea who that was.

“Could it be that you don’t know who Claire-sama is?” Reitia asked in surprise.

Hayato nodded, “Yeah, if you wouldn’t mind telling—”

“Oi, you guys. Hurry up and come into the auditorium,” a teacher called out, interrupting Hayato.

“Looks like the ceremony’s about to start.”

Just as Emil finished speaking, noise began to fill the auditorium.

“Looks like we’ll have to finish this conversation later; let’s head in.”

Reitia rushed in first, followed by Hayato and the others.

Following instructions, they lined up, whereupon the ceremony promptly began.

From the wings of the stage, two girls appeared: a tall, pony-tailed girl with imposing eyes and a girl with red-rimmed glasses and a short, studious-looking haircut.

Both were approximately the same age as Hayato and the others and were also dressed in Bugeika uniforms. The green of the uniforms which Hayato

and friends wore, however, differed from the blue of the upperclassmen now appearing onstage.

“Dear freshmen, welcome to Little Garden!”

Standing center stage with a mic in front of her, and cutting off all conversation with her words, was the girl with a brown ponytail. As she spoke, noise in the auditorium ceased.

“I am the vice president of Little Garden Bugeika High School’s student council, Ridi Steinberg. I am also the person in charge of the freshmen’s training; please, bear that in mind,” Bowing her head briefly, she continued, “Now, let me introduce you all to the student standing beside me. She, like I, is both a second-year student as well as another vice president of the student council: Erika Candle. Together, we will conduct this ceremony.”

“I am Erika Candle. My fellow students, first and foremost, I’d like to congratulate you on your entrance to Little Garden Bugeika High School.”

The bespectacled girl gave this introduction before bowing politely and placing a small chest on top of the podium. Undoing its cover, she removed a triangular badge from within and presented it for the freshmen to see.

“From this point forward, you are all entitled to wear this badge. This proclaims your status as a student of Little Garden.”

This badge was already attached to the uniforms of the vice president pair and the others standing onstage. Theirs bore the number ‘two’ on their surfaces, likely indicating their status as second-years.

“Each student will now be called by name. Please step forward and claim your badge. First—”

One by one, as called by Ridi, the students proceeded to the front and accepted their badges from Erika.

“It seems like they’re calling those with the lowest rankings on the aptitude exam first,” Reitia muttered, as the ceremony approached the halfway mark.

“How would you know that?” Hayato enquired.

“The rankings have been posted, it seems. On the way over, some people spread the info, so if it’s true, I should be next.”

She was indeed.

“See? Just like I said, right?” Reitia boasted proudly, taking off toward the stage.

Since some 20 or so of the 30 total had already been called, her reaction reading must have been relatively high among the freshmen.

“We’re pretty much the only ones left now,” Fritz remarked.

“I know that Hayato was the best, but are we really the only ones after him?” Emil asked as Ridi called Fritz’ name.

“Looks like you’re better than me. I’ll go first then.”

Parting with these words, Fritz headed to the stage.

As he stepped onto the stage, high-pitched cheers broke out among the girls in the audience.

Tall, with gorgeous blonde hair, and a smart appearance. Even as another male, Hayato well understood his popularity with the opposite gender; that was how much he stood out.

“Speaking of which, given such a testosterone-filled name as ‘Bugeika’, there are surprisingly more women than men...” Hayato murmured, glancing around the room.

The number of males, Hayato included, amounted to less than a fifth of the total.

“Each year, the percentage of men that enroll grows, but it seems the Hundred just react more strongly to women. We’re something of a rare species here, you know?”

“In other words, since this school gathers those that the Hundred react to, there are more women...”

“Do you prefer it this way, Hayato?”

“That’s, well, it’s certainly better than being surrounded by a bunch of lazy, filthy men, that’s for sure.”

“Hmph, Hayato’s just another guy after all.”

“Guy’, is it... Doesn’t that apply to you as well?”

“Well, that might be true, but...” Emil responded, smiling vaguely.

“Muu^[8]...”

Reitia returned, a look of dissatisfaction evident on her face.

“...Something wrong?”

“That’s obvious, isn’t it? Reitia’s upset about how popular Fritz is with the girls, right?”

“Oi, you! Don’t say unnecessary things!”

“Ehehe, sorry, sorry. Wait— I’m up next, right?”

Just as predicted, Ridi called out Emil’s name.

“That’s incredible...” Hayato mumbled unwittingly as Emil walked toward the stage, drawing just about the same number of cheers Fritz had.

“What are you talking about? The cheering for you is bound to be far more amazing.”

Fritz hadn’t been back for but a second before blurting out something outrageous.

“Like that’ll happen...” Hayato denied immediately.

Moments ago, the host of voices screaming that Fritz was ‘so cool’ could be easily heard. These same voices could now be heard crying out ‘so cute’.

Hayato was neither as built as Fritz nor as cute as Emil; for better or worse, he felt his own appearance was rather ordinary. Undoubtedly, that, too, was how others saw him. There was no way someone like him would generate any cheers—

“C’mon, it’s your turn. Get going already.”

Urged on by a slap on Hayato's back from Fritz, the auditorium broke out in a clamor far more intense than it had for either Fritz or Emil.

Indeed, the scale was entirely different. Rather than simply echoing through the auditorium, it resounded throughout the building.

I guess I really am getting some attention here...

That said, the gazes focused on his person weren't unilaterally welcoming. Some glared at him with hostility, viewing him as a rival, or with a deep, ugly jealousy. Others peered at him as if he were an exotic animal on exhibit. This was all highly troubling.

"Hayato, do your best, okay?"

Passing through the audience on the way to the stage, he crossed paths with Emil, who wished him well.

Wouldn't 'hang in there' be more appropriate here? he thought.

"...So, you are Kisaragi Hayato?" Erika queried upon his arrival onstage. The eyes behind the glasses stared at Hayato as if measuring him.

He felt a little taken aback, given that she hadn't looked at any of the other freshmen in this way, but nothing else happened that could be described as out of the ordinary.

"Welcome to Little Garden. We look forward to the day when you can serve as a Slayer."

Hayato received the same badge the other students had before joining Emil and the others once more. With that, the award ceremony seemed to have drawn to a close. As Erika put the chest away, the program switched over to an introduction of the teaching staff.

"Everyone's quite young, huh..." Hayato muttered as the teaching staff approached the stage.

The majority seemed to be in their twenties. There were only a small handful who looked at least thirty.

He'd heard the staff was relatively young for having been pioneers in Savage research and Hundred development, but he had honestly never expected it to be to this extent.

After the staff finished introducing themselves, Ridi took the stand once more.

"Next, a word of greeting from the captain of the Academy Battleship, Little Garden; the supervisor of the elementary, middle, and high school section of the Bugeika infantry; our student council president; and she, who holds the position of Queen, Claire-sama."

A nervous energy filled the auditorium.

A beautiful girl with all the noble air of a young lady, her blonde hair in katemaki curls^[9], stepped out of the wings and onto the stage.

Despite having been called a 'Queen', she was of an age comparable to Hayato and his friends. That said, she had a strong, keen gaze and an aura of majestic dignity which made it clear the title was well deserved.

This feeling was further reinforced by the fact that her uniform was uniquely a bright red. This likely signaled her status as president of the student council. By the same reasoning, the blue of the others' probably indicated their status as vice presidents of the same. With the exception of these three, all other upperclassmen wore the same green uniforms as Hayato and the other freshmen.

Queen Claire Harvey finally reached the podium. Silence immediately filled the room as the audience awaited her words.

"Excuse me—!"

"I'm sorry for being late!"

The sound of a door opening could be heard, followed by two voices echoing throughout the silent room. In a flash, everyone's gaze spun from Claire, on the stage, to the entrance, where the voices had originated.

There stood two girls of Oriental lineage. They wore Bugeika uniforms, the collars of which had a noticeable absence: badges.

“Arriving late on your very first day; you guys sure are brave.”

From her spot on the stage, Claire cast the two a withering glare, leaving them trembling in fear.

“Um... we went out earlier this morning to pick up a few things at the shopping center, but it took more time than expected—”

“I didn’t ask for your excuses. You were warned in advance of the need to be punctual,” Claire said flatly, drowning out the girl’s words. Sternly, she continued, “Little Garden has no need for those who can’t keep their word. Promptly pack your belongings and leave.”

The girls looked about ready to break into tears on the spot. The only person to approach them was the vice president, Erika Candle.

“You’ve received an order from Claire-sama. Please return your PDAs at once, and leave this place. Make all necessary preparations for your departure from Little Garden on the morrow, including cleaning out your rooms later this evening,” Erika ordered coldly.

The freshmen in the room were stunned silent, dumbfounded by the sudden turn of events.

“Hey, just a sec, okay?”

Slicing apart the deafening silence with his words, Emil continued, “I don’t care if you’re the captain, Queen, or student council president; punishing someone so harshly for being late just once—isn’t that too much? They’re crying already; why don’t you show a little compassion?”

“Oi, hold up—!”

“Nguu— What do you think you’re doing, Hayato—?!”

Hayato had frantically covered Emil’s mouth with his hand.

“I’m too much? Those should be my words! What do you think you’re doing, butting in so belligerently? By all rights, I should expel you right along with them!”

“I can’t stand it when people abuse their authority, particularly when the only reason you’re captain or student council president or whatever is because of your family.”

“Leveraging family authority for something like that? How could anyone...”

“Claire-sama is a daughter of the family which runs the Warslan Company, and by extension, Little Garden! That means she wields an amazing degree of authority here, you know—?!” Reitia suddenly interrupted, attempting to forestall further argument from both Hayato and Emil.

“A member of the family which runs the Warslan Company, huh? That certainly does make her someone important... if this keeps up, Emil just might really get expelled here...”

Though he’d only just met Emil, and despite finding him somewhat odd, watching his roommate—one who had wished him the best for the duration of his stay in Little Garden—get expelled was, of course, something that did not sit well with him.

“If it’s come to this, I guess it can’t be helped...”

He had to do something about the current situation. Hayato turned to face the president, and offered up his opinion.

“Putting aside the manner in which the argument was made for a moment; to face expulsion for being late just once—don’t you think that’s a little extreme? That’s probably what Emil’s so upset about...”

“You are Kisaragi Hayato, correct?”

Due to his unfamiliarity with polite forms of speech, he faltered and was cut off.

Claire narrowed her eyes, glaring at him in response.

“Err, yeah... That’s... right, but...” Hayato replied, pressured by the force of her gaze.

It seemed even the the president had recognized Hayato’s existence.

“Kisaragi Hayato—no, all students here: engrave the words I’m about to speak in your hearts,” Claire declared. She continued on in a sober tone, “While the Little Garden Bugeika might appear similar, it is ultimately altogether different from a normal school. Each and every one of you will gamble your lives in a war against the Savage; this is why you are Slayer apprentices of the Warslan Company. After graduation, you will be sent to the battlefield, where a single mistake can cause the annihilation of your entire unit. What’s important here isn’t the number of errors, but rather a lack of obedience to the direct orders of a superior officer. Having said that, there’s one more point I would address—”

Shifting her gaze to Emil, Claire went on.

“Emil Crossford, just now, you said that I am student council president and captain because of who my parents are. That is a mistake. I do not stand here now because my father manages the Warslan Company. No, I am the student council president who oversees all students of Little Garden—primary, middle, high, and Bugeika—and captain because I am the Queen who holds the top rank among the Bugeika student body. More precisely, I am the one who has attained the throne of Queen.”

“And what ranking is that? If we’re going by Hundred reaction readings, then Hayato should be on top, no?”

“He has yet to participate in a contest. At present, he holds the top rank among the freshmen and no more.”

The one who had responded to Emil’s question was not Claire, but the vice-president, Erika.

“From this moment forward, once every three months a ranking contest will be held. By participating in duels sanctioned by the student council, students may thus contest one another for rank. The reaction readings are but one factor in evaluating the students of this school.”

“So if he defeats the president in such a duel, and claims the King’s throne, the punishment can be withdrawn, correct?”

“You will hold your tongue, Emil Crossford! How dare you suggest that a mere freshman could surpass Claire-sama, the queen of this school!” roared Erika’s counterpart, Ridi Steinberg.

“This is the first time in history someone has had readings higher than the president’s, no? Without actually trying it, there’s no way we can say whether Hayato could or couldn’t.”

Erika’s face twisted in rage at those words.

“Emil Crossford, if you insult Claire-sama any more than this, you, too, will—”

“Erika, please stop.”

Claire restrained Erika, who had begun to charge toward Emil.

“But Claire-sama—!”

“It’s fine; please give ear to what I am about to say. I have an idea.”

Claire cleared her throat and grinned. Extending her left index finger, she pointed at Hayato, declaring firmly, “I, Claire Harvey, request a duel with the freshman, Kisaragi Hayato!”



“...Eh? Me?”

Hayato’s eyes gaped wide in shock at this sudden proposal. Ridi, Erika, Reitia, Fritz, Emil; they, and all others watching, were similarly stunned.

“On the off-chance you are indeed victorious, it will be as Emil Crossford has said; we will withdraw the punishment imposed upon those two.”

“Claire-sama, are you serious?”

“Of course I am. The two of you are also curious about the ability of the guy who broke my record, the current holder of the highest reaction reading, right? In any case, this is a chance for us of the student council to demonstrate our strength to these freshmen. We were planning on doing so anyway, so this is killing two birds with one stone, really,” Pausing, she added, “Normally duels are reserved for ranking purposes, but this simplifies things a bit.”

“Just hold on a sec! Why are you proposing a duel all of a sudden; I’ve never even used the Hundred in a fight before—”

“Both the first time you touched a Hundred, and the time your reaction reading was measured before you came here—I understand it took the shape of a sword. From what I’ve read of your history, you were taught swordsmanship from the time you were young. You should have more than enough preparation. I get the feeling you’re not the kind who’d back down from a fight, so how about it?”

“That...”

That was certainly true. However, it was also true that he was a complete amateur in all matters regarding the Hundred. He had no way of gauging his proficiency in Hundred combat without first giving it a try.

“Might I ask a question first?”

“Go ahead. What is it?”

“I understand that if I win, the expulsion of those two students will be withdrawn, but what happens if I lose?” Hayato couldn’t help but ask.

The question, however, was rather like stirring a hornet's nest.

"That's a good point. How about you sweep the student council room every day until graduation? Or, perhaps, I ought to make you my assistant?"

"Wait a sec, that's—"

"We are the ones compromising here," Claire crushed Emil's objections with a single line. "If you find these conditions intolerable, then the deal is off."

Should he refuse, the two students would face immediate expulsion.

Left with no other choice, Hayato responded in turn.

"I accept."

"Is that really alright, Hayato?!"

"If I'd have to face expulsion as well for losing, then I don't know what I'd do, but if it's just something as small as that, then what else can I do? If I don't accept, those two can't be saved."

"If that's the case, then I'll be your substitute." Emil turned towards the president and offered, "Hey, President. I'll bear the punishment in his place if he loses; it's my fault that things have come to this, after all."

"I'm afraid that's not going to happen. Don't think I've overlooked your rebellious attitude; I'm already planning on punishing you as well. Should Kisaragi Hayato miraculously prove victorious, I'll grant you clemency, but I will not allow you to interfere with our wager."

Emil's frustration was plain to see.

Claire continued on with an air of innocence, "It would be rather harsh of me to hold the competition now, so I'll give you some time to prepare. The date for our duel will be set for tomorrow morning. I have given the order for your personal Hundred to be delivered to you immediately; please, retrieve it from the laboratory. Any further questions?"

Hayato and the others didn't speak. There was nothing left to be said.

"Well then, Kisaragi Hayato. I look forward to our fight."

With those words, Claire disappeared into the wings of the stage.

“That president is reeeeally hard to get along with...”

Bleeeeh! Emil stuck his tongue out in annoyance.

“That certainly might be part of it, but that doesn’t mean you should start fights like that. It’s because you’re like that that I have to fight her now.”

Hayato was also partially at fault; he had, after all, had the feeling he’d be dragged into some strange things for befriending Emil.

“Silence!”

Erika, standing at the podium, raised her voice in response to the noise filling the auditorium once more.

“The school entrance ceremony has yet to conclude. I will now describe the school facilities as well as the schedule you will abide from today forward.”

The following proceedings were quite straightforward. The school facilities were detailed in pamphlets found in their rooms. Since the following day was a Saturday, there were no lessons or training to be had, and so, with the exception of areas that were off-limits, they had free rein of the school. It was hoped that they would use the time to acquaint themselves with their fellow students and townspeople.

However, because Hayato needed to prepare himself for the duel, he could not afford the time for such activities.

“Thank you so much for helping us—”

“It’s because of us that you’re in trouble; we’re so sorry—”

After the ceremony had drawn to a close and Erika and Ridia had departed, the two who had been threatened with expulsion had approached Hayato and Emil. Bowing, they expressed their gratitude.

“Save that for after the duel...”

The duel’s outcome had yet to be decided, after all. Gratitude was premature. Just as Hayato was about to express his feelings on the matter—

“Everything’s going to be alright; Hayato will definitely save you!” Emil declared with confidence.

“Oi, Emil... Could you cut it out with the unneeded commentary already...?”

Hayato’s first impression had been that he was just a guy with a cute face, but that cute appearance belied the recklessness with which he aggressively picked fights and fanned the flames with his words. *Just what on earth is going on in that head of his? Well, not like I can bring myself to hate him, though...* he lamented resignedly to himself with a sigh.

Chapter 2: Laboratory/Hundred/Crash Course

The following events took place shortly after the conclusion of the school entrance ceremony.

Having parted with Fritz and Reitia, who had expressed a desire to explore the school, Hayato and Emil walked the halls to the laboratory.

“Remind me, why are you coming along?”

“Wouldn’t you just get lost if I left you alone?”

“That’s certainly a possibility, but still...”

The interior design of the Bugeika school building – which coupled beige walls with cream-colored linoleum floors – was repetitive to the extent it was practically draining.

This, of course, did not exclude the first floor of the basement where the laboratory was housed.

The design made it rather simple for one to be easily lost, but, knowing that Emil had a copy of the building map on his PDA should the need arise, the two were quite carefree as they made their way to the entrance of the laboratory in question.

“Is it really alright to just waltz on in like this?” Hayato wondered aloud, having caught sight of a sign by the door proclaiming access for ‘Authorized Personnel Only’.

“The president was the one who told us to get in touch with the lab, so it should be fine. Let me give something a try here...”

Having thus spoken, Emil raised his PDA to the scanner placed alongside the door. An electronic beep echoed and the word ‘OK’ appeared on the intercom display.

“Looks fine to me.”

Smiling as the door opened on its own, Emil walked in.

Hayato followed.

“Well, it certainly feels like a laboratory...” he said on impulse, referring to the lighting in the dimly lit room.

The lights on the ceiling which would normally light the room were all off. Instead, the room was illuminated with the ambient light of the dense crowd of machines and massive computers which filled its space, draping the scene in a truly eerie glow.

In a particularly brightly-lit corner of the room, seated before a great number of monitors, was a girl in a white labcoat, slouched over in her chair.

“Char, you’re really here!”

Emil raced over, gripping the girl in a tight embrace.

“What do you think you’re doing all of a sudden?!” Hayato shouted in shock.

The girl in the labcoat, however, didn’t so much as bat an eye in response.

“Char?” Emil called again, peeking at her face. “...S-She’s dead?!”

“Say WHAT?!”

“Just kidding~ She’s asleep, I think.”

“Give me a break...”

“Ehehe,” Emil laughed, trying to smooth things over.

Upon closer inspection, her fluffy hair and honeybee-patterned hair tie, gently rose and fell with the rhythm of a sleeper’s breathing.

“—From the looks of things, I’m guessing you know her?”

“Yep, Char’s my patron.”

“Patron, huh...?”

He did recall her having mentioned a ‘Char’ back in the dorms. It seemed the sleeping girl before his eyes was the aforementioned Char.

"Char here's something of a wunderkind. She earned her PhD at the most acclaimed university in the Weimar Kingdom when she was primary-school age. By middle school, she had already become the foremost expert on genome engineering, alchemy, and other such things. That was when I met her; she taught me about the Hundred and I received mine at that time."

As Emil spoke, he continued to shake Char by the shoulders.

"Come on, Char. Wake up! It's me, Emil."

Char stirred and – half-awake – offered up an, "Ooh, it's been a while, Emily—–" before cutting off mid-sentence.

"Guni—" she went instead, as Emil pinched her cheeks.

"-ut aw oo zooing..."

With her small cheeks forced apart by a vice-like grip, Char couldn't talk normally.

"Char, you're still half asleep. I'm Emil, Emil Crossford!"

"Ooh, that's right. Emil; you're Emil, Emil Crossford. Morning, Emil. It's been a while; what's up?" Char responded, yawning as she rubbed her eyes tiredly.

Her height was comparable with – no, perhaps even shorter than Reitia. The hem of her labcoat dragged along the ground.

Moreover, she had quite the baby face.

Given what he'd heard from Emil a moment ago, she ought to be roughly the age of Hayato and the others, if not slightly older. With her in front of him, however, it was difficult to reconcile this fact with her appearance; he simply could not see her as being anything but years younger than himself.

"As you see, I was able to safely arrive in Little Garden as of today. This is also thanks to you, Char. Thank you..." Emil said, giving Char a tight hug.

"Oi, oi, greeting me with a hug is fine, but are you okay clinging to me like this? Won't that guy over there misunderstand something?"

“Hahaha, there’s no need to worry about that. Char’s seen as nothing but a child. Isn’t that right, Hayato...?”

“Certainly, it wouldn’t feel out of place calling her an elementary schooler, but...”

“Oi, you guys, regardless of the circumstances, that’s still impolite, alright! I’m of an age where I shouldn’t be described as anything but a young lady; of an age where I can even bear children— Er, actually, that was hardly a self-introduction, right? I am Charlotte Dymandias, the main technologist of this lab.”

“Uh, I’m...”

“Kisaragi Hayato, right? I’m well aware.”

Hayato was interrupted just as he was about to introduce himself.

“I’ve already seen the data of all students enrolled in the Bugeika with [LiZA], the academy mainframe,” Charlotte said, indicating to an object in the center of the room shaped like a pillar, or perhaps a thick tree trunk, with a thump of her hand.

“Is that [LiZA]?”

As if prompted by Hayato’s question, the color of the monitor changed, radiating a blue glow throughout the room; it now read the word ‘Exactly’.

“...What the heck?”

“Did Char do that just now?”

Hayato and Emil called out one after another.

“Nope; that was [LiZA] herself. She’s an autonomous system so she can do something like that if she wants, you know?” Char replied.

The characters on the screen began to change.

[Kisaragi Hayato. Welcome to Little Garden¹¹.]

“Looks like [LiZA]’s giving you quite the welcome.”

“I don’t quite understand, but it’s pretty amazing, isn’t it? [LiZA]...” Hayato muttered.

“That’s only natural; she’s also Little Garden’s brain, you see. It’s thanks to her that, despite working in a tiny room like this, my research and development of the Hundred is made possible.”

Hayato glanced around the lab once more. The room certainly wasn’t all that large; there were no more than three desks, after all.

“This lab produces the Hundred, so I figured there would be a bunch of scientists and technologists involved and that they’d need some rather large heavy-machinery, but I guess that’s not the case?”

“While the Hundred use the ore known as Variable Stone for raw material, they are made through a process of computer-controlled genetic manipulation, coupled with a design process that has been evolving since the middle ages. Large equipment is uncalled for. Also, I may not look it, but I’m really smart, you know; I can do the work of about three scientists by myself,” Char declared, laughing heartily.

“A moment ago, Emil described you as a ‘wunderkind’?”

“Well, I’m still often called that, but well, it kind of feels a bit derogatory, in my opinion. Putting that aside... How can I help you guys? If it’s just for small talk, I’ll have to take a rain check; I’ve been up all night organizing the data of you freshmen and I haven’t had much rest. I’m quite exhausted.”

“So that’s why Char didn’t come to the school entrance ceremony.”

“You could say that. If you like, why don’t you come back later? Give me an hour to rest; no, better make that two.”

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but we can’t wait that long. Could you spare about an hour for us? I think you should have gotten notice from the president...”

“The president? From the Queen? Let me check.”

Char popped the lollipop in her hand back into her mouth and began to run her fingers over the optical keyboard.

The large monitor switched to display email software, which reported a considerable number of newly arrived mail.

“Indeed, it seems I’ve received a mail from the Queen. Wait, huh?”

Spinning her seat around, Char turned to face Hayato.

“...So why exactly is it that you’re to duel Claire Harvey?” Charlotte asked, popping her lollipop out of her mouth.

“I’ll be explaining that to you,” Emil interrupted, before beginning to summarize what had occurred during the school entrance ceremony.

“Yare, yare. What a shock...”

Charlotte heaved a deep sigh as Emil finished his explanation.

“Still as tomboyish as ever— Err, wait, you wouldn’t call a man that, would you? Uh, what a bold personality. Even that disrespect for those in positions of authority – that part of you hasn’t changed either...”

“Emil’s always been like this?”

“For at least as long as I’ve known him. I can’t even count the number of times I’ve had to apologize to his family because of him..... To begin with, the fact that he was able to leave his country and come here is thanks to me.”

“Wait a sec, Charlotte! Don’t say anything unnecessary—!”

“Hahaha, my bad, my bad. Well then, shall we get to Kisaragi Hayato-kun’s final Hundred maintenance? If we don’t, I can’t hand over the Hundred, you know?” said Char as she lifted the receiver for the room phone.

“That was my assistant,” she informed them.

A few minutes after she hung up, the lab door abruptly opened. A woman, strangely dressed in a maid uniform, rushed in, gasping for air.

“Char-sama, thank you for your patience! ...So, are these the guests—?!”

She had (attached?) both cat ears atop her head as well as a tail and boasted a lovely figure, and on the whole was attended by a rather unworldly atmosphere.

...Could this person possibly be the assistant in question?

“We talked about this before didn’t we? This is my close friend, Emil Crossford. And the guy over there is Kisaragi Hayato.”

“Oh—?! I see!”

The girl leapt to her feet, positioning herself before Hayato and the others and bowed her head.

“I am Charlotte-sama’s assistant, Meimei— So this is the rumored Kisaragi Hayato-san?! Well, now that I think about it, I’ve already seen you in the school database. But this is my first time seeing you in person. Would you mind if I gave you a quick whiff?”

“A ‘whiff’...?”

Without bothering to heed the response of the utterly bewildered Hayato, the woman who’d introduced herself as Charlotte’s assistant leaned in near his chest, and began to sniff him.

“I’d heard you’d come from Yamato originally, so I figured you’d smell like soy sauce. I guess that isn’t the case, though.”

“Um, even if someone’s from Yamato, I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t smell like soy sauce. Similarly, you wouldn’t smell corn on people from Libia either, right?”

“Now that you mention it, that’s indeed true. Meimei’s learned something new.”

Meimei nodded with an ‘mhm mhm’.

“You’re probably thinking about how strange she is, but I can vouch for the fact that she’s definitely sharp. No matter what the rest of her may be like, she’s basically a disciple of mine, so you can be sure she’s more than on top of things when it comes to the Hundred.”

“Yep, I’m on top of things!”

Meimei enthusiastically clenched her fists before her.

“Ha, haha...”

Despite what Charlotte had said, he honestly couldn’t see her as a competent and able individual, but that said, if it weren’t for Charlotte’s white labcoat, he probably wouldn’t be able to envision her as the exceptional technologist she was either. He had heard, after all, that occupations such as scientist and technologist happened to have a disproportionate number of eccentrics within their ranks. He decided to stop thinking about it too deeply.

“...So, Char-sama – what would you like me to do?”

“First things first, I could use some coffee. Don’t skimp on the sugar; I want it sweet. Oh, and the donuts at the cafeteria are pretty popular, right? Why don’t you grab me some? Get some for Emil and Hayato as well.”

“In other words, you’d like to eat, right?”

“Well, it’s lunchtime, isn’t it? Forget going to war, you can’t even get your brain to work with an empty stomach. We’ll proceed with maintenance after we’ve had lunch.”

“Roooger that!” Meimei answered animatedly as she skipped out the lab.

After their meal, Hayato and Emil read up on Claire Harvey to pass the time until the maintenance on his Hundred finished.

Char had informed them of their ability to access her data via [LiZA]’s terminal.

The data in question was hardly a secret, being accessible to the entire student body, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t useful for his upcoming duel.

Claire’s Hundred boasted extreme mobility, and true to its nature as a Dragoon-type model, could freely employ heavy weaponry. Its name, carrying the meaning of ‘Noble War Princess’, was Alystherion. Counting

from when Little Garden and the Bugeika had been founded two years prior, she had never once lost, and so she'd come to be known as the 'Perfect Queen'^[2].

She was someone who had battled twelve Savage as a lone Slayer in the two years since her admission. The total number of sorties against the Savage to date numbered 17, and thus she'd not only participated in nearly every battle, but she'd dealt the killing blow in over half of the battles she'd taken part in. Her merits in battle had earned her the nickname 'Rose Guardian'.

"...What chance do I have against someone with nicknames like that?"

"But Hayato's amazing Hundred reaction reading is overwhelmingly higher – that surely has to count for *something*'..."

"You just keep going on and on about that aptitude test reading, don't you?"

It didn't matter how many naturally gifted athletes you assembled, if they'd never played football before, you still wouldn't have much of a game, right? Something like victory existed only in the realm of dreams. Hayato was about to voice such complaints when Meimei bounced in from the workshop adjoined to the lab.

"All done—!" she exclaimed, extending a small box to Hayato.

"This Hundred is exclusively for Hayato-sama's use; please be careful with it, all right?"

Within lay a blood-red, octahedral crystal with a string: A portable, pendant-shaped Hundred.

"So this is my personal Hundred..."

Taking the crystal in hand, Hayato lifted it above his head for a better look.

"Its appearance hasn't been customized, but it's been adjusted to be compatible with you. I think you'll be quite pleased with the results," Charlotte added.

"Hey, Hayato, hurry up and deploy it already!"

"...'Deploy' it you say...and how would I go about doing that?"

“Hold your horses for a moment, okay? If a beginner were to deploy a Hundred here, there’s no telling what could happen. Spare me that, would you?”

“By that logic, what would count as an acceptable place to give it a try? The duel’s tomorrow; I’d really like to practice——”

“I figured you’d say that, so I went ahead and booked the practice grounds already. Seeing as no one else was using it, it should be open for use.”

“That’s Char for you! Thanks!”

After receiving a hug of gratitude from Emil, Charlotte picked up a piece of candy atop the table and stashing it in her pocket, walked toward the exit.

“Since it’s come to this, it can’t be helped – I’ll take you to the training grounds so please follow me.”

※※※

The training grounds were located at the first level of the basement and situated a short distance from the main Bugeika building.

As Charlotte opened the door, a large, rectangular space revealed itself before Hayato’s eyes.

Charlotte explained that it was of an equal size to the auditorium the school entrance ceremony had been held in, but because of sheer amount of space that had been allocated to the battle arena in the room’s center, it felt extremely spacious.

The field was surrounded by glass partitions; each partition housing a few seats of a kind that could be found in a movie theatre, baseball stadium, or concert hall.

“This is just like back in Gutenburg, huh?” Emil muttered, glancing around.

“I’d planned on using this training ground. For starters, why don’t we head down to the battle arena?” Charlotte said as she descended the path to the arena, with Hayato and company trailing after her.

“It seems kinda barren, doesn’t it?” Hayato mused.

Hayato’s thoughts mirrored the scene before him; the ground was paved with neither concrete nor linoleum as one might expect, but was instead simply dirt.

“Even if this is a training ground, the point is to simulate battle with the Savage. In real combat, you’d fight in an environment like this as opposed to one with clean, paved floors, you know?”

“Though the Colosseum has no roof and its spectator stands are several times larger than the ones here, when it comes to either the size of the arena or the atmosphere, you’ll find things identical to the practice ground here. That’s why it’ll serve well to get yourself accustomed to the feel of things,” Charlotte chimed in, adding to Meimei’s words. “Incidentally, since the activation of Hundred skills not only poses a risk to bystanders, but causes extensive collateral damage as well, Bugeika lessons are also held here.”

“Yep, yep. The walls, glass, etc. of this practice ground were designed to take a beating, even from a Hundred or the Savage. Feel free to test their durability for yourself.”

“A-Alright...”

Following Meimei’s prompting, he gave the wall a hefty blow, but it simply rippled on contact, dispersing the impact.

“What is this...?”

“The surface is layered with a shock-absorbent material; it employs electrical engineering techniques to form a barrier of sorts.”

“Little Garden sure is amazing...”

“Fruits of my labors, you know?” Charlotte proclaimed, thumping her chest proudly.

“Now then, to start things off, shall we have you change into your combat suit, Hayato-sama?”

“Change...? Why would I have to change clothes just to deploy the Hundred?”

“In order to draw out the full abilities of the Hundred, it’s necessary to wear your personal Variable Suit.”

As she spoke, Meimei turned to face a door opposite her and began walking toward it.

“In tomorrow’s duel, you’ll also be using this Variable Suit, and so it needs some adjustments, just like your Hundred. We’ll explain things one at a time, so please go ahead and get changed, alright?”

After changing and having said adjustments made, Hayato left the locker room and returned to the arena where Charlotte, Emil, and Meimei awaited him.

At any rate, this suit’s pretty simplistic, isn’t it?

His thoughts were prompted by Emil’s outfit, the design of which differed from Hayato’s, and clung to his body almost like some kind of bodysuit.

“What are you staring at...?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that I’m not really able to see my own suit that well, so...”

Because it was called a combat suit, he’d imagined it would be rather bulky; the true appearance of the Variable Suit was just the opposite, however.

By breaking down the ore that formed the core of the Hundred, the Variable Stone, and incorporating it into the suit’s fibers, not only did it gain the ability to deploy the Hundred, but the suit’s own shape changed as well.

Hence the adjustments Meimei had made in the locker room.

A multitude of factors – such as one’s current condition, psyche, and aptitude with the Hundred – all played a role in determining the form a

Variable Suit took, and thus each person's suit was as unique as was their Hundred.

Accordingly, both the color and form of Emil's and Hayato's suits differed.

"...So, seeing as you're also wearing a Variable Suit, I'm assuming you also have your Hundred?"

"I've had it with me this entire time."

"...Meaning even before you got here...?"

Naturally, Hayato was astonished. The Hundred were powerful weapons.

In the hands of a skilled user, the single-handed destruction of an entire combat regiment was more than a possibility.

Accordingly, their use was tightly regulated by many countries and licenses to possess one were restricted to troops belonging to either the UN or PMCs.

At the time of his enrollment, he'd had to sign a mountain of paperwork and was subjected to many a psychological examination.

"Indeed, his situation is unusual," Charlotte cut in. "But, well... Emil's Hundred reading is fairly high and it seemed useful for my research, so I made the necessary arrangements, and he was given special dispensation."

In other words, an exception had been made.

"...In that case, wouldn't it be better for Emil to fight instead? Having taken part in your research, I imagine his skill with the Hundred is considerable."

"The president challenged you directly, so that's not really an option, is it? My fate already hangs in the balance as it is. Anyway, first things first, deploy your Hundred; let's see it already."

"Deploy... It's the same process as when we were first tested, right...?"

Responding to his question, Charlotte, and not Emil, answered.

“First, touch your Hundred. The next part’s all the same up until the part where you speak your desire for it to become a weapon; then, shout ‘Hundred on’. That’s the keyphrase to initiate deployment.”

“‘Hundred on’, is it...?”

“For now, just give it a try.”

With a nod, Hayato gripped his Hundred tightly. A blood-red light burst forth from between the fingers of his hand in response. This was the color of his Energy.

“HUNDRED ON!”

As he shouted with all his might, the Hundred suddenly burst into fragments and reformed itself around his right arm.

The form it took was that of a rugged arm protector in the design of traditional Yamato armor – multiple tiers of layered protection.

Extending downward from his shoulder to the base of his hand, his right arm was completely transformed.

Most eye-catching, however, was an enormous sword with a blade measuring over a meter in length, taking the place of the Hundred he’d taken in his hand. It could well have been described as a zanbatou^[3].
“So how is it? Your personal Hundred – [Hien]^[4].”

Hayato’s gaze took in the weapon Charlotte had developed, and he smiled in satisfaction.

“So this guy’s called [Hien], huh...?” Hayato muttered, looking at the sword in his hand.

“Yeah, Chevalier-types resemble the warriors of your country – Yamato – in both name and form. How does it feel?”

“It’s huge and heavy, but other than that...the feel of it in my hand is just right.”

Taking a stance with [Hien], he swung once, twice in practice.

“Of course. *I* was the one responsible for it, after all. In this way, your physical advantages – your agility and dexterity – can be leveraged; you should be more than maneuverable. If you’re pleased with it, then that’s the most important thing.”

Brimming with self-confidence, she nodded her head at her craftsmanship.

Indeed, work of a quality expected from the one called ‘wunderkind’.

During the examination when he had first laid hands on the Hundred, though it had more or less taken the form of a katana, it nonetheless had branches protruding from all angles, as if a mysterious objet d’art. Now, however, it had properly taken form as a sword.

The improvements could more than likely be attributed to the adjustments that had been made, as Charlotte had said.

This was a sword made for battling the Savage; a sword made for Hayato.

“Now, it’s my turn.”

Emil pulled a pendant out from around his neck. It had a red crystal attached to it.

“Is that your...?”

“This is my Hundred.”

Tossing his pendant above his head, Emil yelled, “HUNDRED ON!”

Unlike Hayato’s, Emil’s Hundred radiated a blue light before diffusing into particles and reforming, enveloping Emil’s body like a coat and eventually forming over a dozen floating objects.

“So that’s your weapon...?”

Rather than a weapon, it looked more like a defensive armament of some sort.

A closer inspection revealed that it lacked a sturdy form, like that of Hayato’s [Hien].

Instead, the particles had formed into a handful of clusters.

“Its name is [Arms Shroud]⁵⁵. The manipulation of these particles is the form my Hundred takes – it’s based on the ‘Innocence’ type.”

“‘Innocence’ type...?”

After his transfer had been confirmed, he’d skimmed a book on the Hundred as preparation. Within its pages had been laid out the various kinds of Hundred.

These included Hayato’s Chevalier, the president’s Dragoon, Long Shooter, which formed the core of their long distance artillery; Martial Arts, which specialized in hand-to-hand combat, and so on and so forth. In all, there were more than a hundred types.

But not once was there mention made of an ‘Innocence’ type. That alone demonstrated its unconventionality.

“Can I ask – how exactly do you plan to fight with that?”

Defense was one thing, but he really couldn’t see how you’d attack with it.

“I simply have [Arms Shroud] change into a weapon,” Emil replied.

The solid mass of particles covering his body flashed a brilliant blue-white. Suddenly, in his hand was a short gun barrel, which quickly took the form of a rifle-like gun pod.

“It’s said that the president’s Dragoon-type employs weaponry of this design, so that makes me the perfect sparring partner.”

That certainly seemed to be the case.

“Even if you say that... How can you suddenly change your Hundred’s form like that...?”

The gun pod hovered above Emil’s right shoulder, floating in mid-air.

“Haha, well, my Hundred’s a little ‘special’, but there are other Slayers who can change the form of their weapons in battle, so it’s good that you’re experiencing this early on. Putting that aside for the moment, let’s get started with practice; there’s no time to waste.”

“That much is true.”

It was indisputable that they were short on time.

He had, after all, been informed by Meimei while changing that they had only been able to reserve the training grounds for three hours.

“To begin, what do you know about Sense Energy, Hayato?”

“If I recall correctly, it’s released from a human’s body, and is made up of minute particles... or something like that?”

It wasn’t something he’d ever seen with his own eyes, but the Hundred both reacted to, and changed in accordance with it... What he’d just recited was his recollection of something he’d once read in a book.

“Just so. More generally, this energy is also referred to as ‘ki’ or ‘magical power’, but here in Little Garden, it’s ‘Sense Energy’, or just ‘Energy’ for short.”

“Incidentally, once your Energy reading hits zero, it becomes impossible for the Hundred to maintain its form, so do be careful,” Charlotte added. “When that occurs during a duel, you lose.”

In other words, Sense Energy could well be construed as life itself to a Slayer.

“Our goal today is for you to learn to use this Energy; to imbue your weapon with Energy, to defend against an opponent’s attack by forming a barrier, and then to employ Energy for both Accelerate and Jump. Moreover, we’d like to assess your ability with a sword as well as physical abilities – the bare minimums necessary to fight.”

Emil had hit upon a number of points in a row without pausing. There was a considerable number of things Hayato needed to be mindful of, and yet that apparently constituted just the bare minimum.

I seem to be in a bit of a tight spot here...

He thought to himself that if the duel had been a week from now and not a day, then he might have had a chance. At this point, however, it was too late to worry about such things; he had no choice but to learn what he could in the next few hours.

“Haaaw~ I don’t think I can stay up much longer. It’s about time I got some rest. It was originally my intent to see you to this point, and if you were able to deploy your Hundred without any issues, then I’d like to go back home and sleep.”

“In that case, I, too, shall take my leave. I wouldn’t want to intrude upon you two.”

“Intrude...”

Seeing Emil’s face blushing a deep red, Hayato unintentionally cocked an eyebrow.

“What’s up with that reaction...?”

“Hahaha, anyway, if you need anything, don’t hesitate to give Meimei a call. If you dial extension 18 on the training grounds’ phone, you’ll be connected with her, alright?”

Charlotte yawned airily as she exited the training grounds along with Meimei.

“Now then, first things first. Why don’t we test your proficiency with Energy?”

“Test, huh? And how on Earth do you plan to do that?”

“Oh, kind of like this...”

“—Uwa—?!”

A beam suddenly fired from the gun pod floating above Emil’s right shoulder.

Drawing [Hien] in front of his body in guard, Hayato blocked the assault of blue-white light that drew near.

GAKIN!

[Hien] made a shrill sound, and he felt a jarring impact run up his arm.

“What do you think you’re doing all of a sudden?!”

He'd been somewhat able to defend against it, but had he been even a moment slower with [Hien], he'd likely have been hit directly by the beam.

"Hahaha, well, I'll be; I never would have guessed [Hien] could just stop the beam like that..."

"That's not something to laugh about! And you didn't answer my question..."

"I figured I'd test whether or not you could use an E-Barrier."

"E-Barrier... Uh, that's that Energy-Barrier thing, right?"

It'd been mentioned in the book he'd read.

"Right. Energy is released from the body which then expands into a Barrier which mitigates the opponent's attack – it's one of the most fundamental techniques in a Slayer's repertoire. The process for creating one is simple: just picture yourself deflecting an incoming bullet. In other words, it's just like deploying the Hundred... And with that, here I come again!"

"Oi, wait a sec!"

"Not a chance! Practice makes perfect, you know!"

His tone suggesting he was enjoying himself tremendously, Emil caused one of the [Arm Shroud] clusters to form another gun pod, and again fired a beam.

"Even if he said to just picture deflecting a bullet..."

Naturally, he didn't have the time to consider the matter too deeply – the beam was already before him. He simply stuck out his hand in response.

The sole thought which occupied his mind was that of wanting the beam to stop.

"Ah, I did it..."

The beam failed to contact Hayato's body. Just before reaching him, it exploded and disappeared.

"That's great, isn't it, Hayato? Let's try a few more."

Emil proceeded to fire five beams one after another in rapid succession. Hayato was able to stop all of them.

“Amazing, Hayato. Perfection in an instant! With this, you’ve learned the basics. Throwing up an E-Barrier, bestowing Energy on the Hundred, and using Energy for Accelerate and Jump – they’re all essentially the same, you know?”

“In other words, I’ve reached the barest minimum of what a master of martial arts can do...?”

With that thought, a tiny bit of self-confidence gushed up within him.

“From here on out, the rest depends on your endurance. We’re going to engage in real combat training, alright? It’s easier to coach during an actual match.”

Emil caused more of [Arm Shroud]’s fragments, floating around his body, to change form, creating yet more gun pods.

“Alright then, let’s begin! Stop these with your E-Barrier, like you were doing earlier!”

Emil manipulated the gun pods, firing one beam after another.

“...That’s—!”

Hayato expanded an E-Barrier, protecting himself from a pair of beams.

A light impact ran through his body, but only to the extent of having caught a thrown ball; there wasn’t really any damage to speak of.

“You’ve already mastered the E-Barrier, looks like? But you can’t win if you just stay on the defensive, you know!”

In other words, Emil was telling him he needed to go on the offensive.

He decided to accelerate toward Emil, and deal him an Energy-imbued blow.

Since it’s come to this, there’s nothing to do but try!

First, Accelerate—

Focusing his thoughts on closing the distance, he expelled Energy from his feet right as he kicked off from the ground, adding an explosive thrust to his leap. Closing the gap between Emil and himself in an instant, he imbued [Hien] with his Energy, and slashed downward.

Filling his hands with power, he charged them with Energy. The various ornamentations which decorated [Hien]'s blade shone a brilliant crimson – the color of his Energy.

Filling [Hien] with his Energy was a success.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAA—!”

His timing was similarly perfect!

It was a magnificent attack. That, however, wasn't nearly enough to land a blow on Emil.

“Whoopsie...”

Emil casually manipulated the particles of [Arms Shroud] floating around his body, formed two shields and, crossing them, blocked [Hien]'s downward swing.

“...Amazing. Not just a perfect Accelerate on your first try, but to even succeed at imbuing your Hundred with Energy – it's beyond expectation. If that'd been a direct hit, I'd probably have gone down.”

Laughing delightedly as he spoke, Emil absentmindedly operated his two shields, sending Hayato's [Hien] flying.

“Uwa—?!”

Hayato, his balance having been thrown awry by Emil's counter, was thrown on his back. Emil stopped attacking.

“If you can do this much with what little I've taught you, then you just might manage against the president.”

Emil turned to Hayato, who was dusting himself off, and held out his hand. Hayato grasped it, and was lifted to his feet.

“Your words... do you mean to say that you don’t think I can win...?”

“Hahaha, that’s not what I’m saying at all. I’m talking about devising a plan of attack; we’ll need a strategy.”

“...Strategy?”

“Yep. To win against the president, you’ll need stra-te-gy.”

※※※

The intense training continued on without a moment’s rest, not letting up until the very moment their reservation time ended, the majority of their time was dedicated to practicing in accordance with the strategy Emil had developed.

Though it was tough going in the beginning, he found he was still able to enjoy himself. From the halfway point on, however, the training had ceased to be anything other than grueling. He was utterly exhausted.

“...Yeesh, I’m completely worn-out...”

The sun had long since set, and Hayato, having already changed and left the practice grounds, was walking the path back to the dorms with Emil at his side.

Crossing the distance between the school and the dorms was normally a five-minute walk, but in his fatigued state, it felt infinitely longer.

“If that’s the case, why not try out the public bath?” Emil suggested, as they finally arrived at the dorm building.

“...The public bath?”

“It’s in the dorm’s basement, and the bathtub there is made from natural minerals. It supposedly has a beneficial effect on both stamina and Energy regeneration; it says here that it’s intended for student use.”

The referenced page was an info page for students, found in the PDA's browser. Hayato hadn't yet given it a look.

"Sure, let's give it a try."

"N-No, I'm think I'm good. You can go alone, can't you...?"

"What's with that weak response? First, you tell me about it, and then now you say you're not planning on going? You exerted yourself every bit as much as I did; there's no way you're not tired."

"But... Wouldn't it be embarrassing to go in together with Hayato; isn't it still too soon for that...?"

"There you go saying that kinda stuff again..."

When they had been changing into their Variable Suits, Emil had commented that it was too embarrassing to do so at the same time, and had refused to change together.

"Well, yeah. Taking a bath together's definitely a step above just changing together. Being together the whole time, completely naked... And it's undoubtedly a large public bath, so you'd completely submerge yourself in it, right..."

"Come to think of it, Britannia doesn't have that custom, does it..."

"In Yamato, it should be pretty common, right? It was written that this bath is based on the hot springs of Yamato."

"Yeah, I guess that's true, isn't it? I've gone to the hot springs a few times, and it's a rather pleasant experience; I'm sure you'd like it."

"But..."

"You really hate the thought of going with me that much, huh?"

"Eehm, that's, well.... It's not that I hate it, but isn't it too soon...?"

"In other words, you have no plans of going with me today."

"Yeah, it'll happen sooner or later. For today, though, I'm just gonna head back to the room. I'm fine with just a shower."

On this matter, it seemed Emil wouldn't budge.

Even though he went through such pains to tell me about the public bath; it's really such a waste...

Emil was really a strange person.

"In that case, I'll go by myself."

Hayato gave up on trying to get Emil to join him. He briefly returned to their dorm room to change before taking off for the bath.

※※※

"Ah— That was nice..."

Exiting the bath alone, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, Hayato returned to his room and pulled his PDA from his pocket.

As Emil had described, the spacious, public bath had been done in the style of those found in Yamato. Just as advertised, it had the miraculous effect of dissipating his fatigue, and his body felt amazingly light. That being the case, it looked like he'd take part in tomorrow's duel in tip-top shape.

"Alright then..."

Given Emil and Fritz's demonstrations for him earlier at the school gate and the entrance to the lab, he knew what the key for his room was.

Holding his PDA to the scanner, it gave a small 'beep'. The attached screen displayed the word 'OK' and the door slid open.

"...Haya... to...?"

A voice could be heard alongside the sound of the opening door, and the atmosphere within the room turned to ice.

Even if his body, from the chest on down, had been frantically covered with a bath towel, Emil was nearly nude. Owing perhaps to the fact that his hair had been let down, his presence now felt quite distinctly feminine.

Moreover, his skin was shockingly fair, more so than even Hayato's sister who almost never ventured outside because of her illness. Fair as the white of freshly fallen snow. That was Westerners for you... as if! Actually, on that point, this was hardly the time for admiration. The other party was a Britannian gentleman who had even hesitated to visit the bath together; that was how easily embarrassed someone like Emil was.

“U-UWAAAA-----!”

Emil screamed and ducked down. Gripping the bath towel tightly in his right hand, he took the still-packed Boston bag at his feet in his left. Given the scene playing out before him, the only possible action he foresaw in his near future involved said object flying toward him.



“Hey, wait a sec! That’s my—”

The contents had yet to be unpacked; that, Hayato himself knew best.

However, even as he raised his voice, he realized it was already too late.

Emil threw the bag.

“Guha—?!”

CRASH, a massive force impacted the crown of his head as darkness filled his vision.

Hayato collapsed unknowingly upon the carpet.

DONK!

Once more, an impact resounded through his brain.

The back of his head had struck the carpeted floor.

“That was close; I was almost found out— Wait, Hayato, are you alright? Hayato!”

The voice frantically calling his name gradually faded into—

A short while after, Hayato’s vision returned, and the scene of a familiar ceiling came into focus.

That’s... the dorm ceiling?

It took a moment before his thoughts coalesced.

I wonder why...

Somehow, he felt strangely comfortable...

“Ah, I’m so relieved. You’ve finally come to.”

“Eh?”

Alongside the interrupting voice, Emil’s face cut into the field of his vision.

With that, Hayato finally understood.

It can't be, that...

It wasn't just soft.

That, both slightly supple and warm, was not a pillow – it was Emil's lap...

“Uwaa?!”

There's no way; why would I fall asleep with my head on a man's lap---

It was soft and comfortable, though... Wait, what the heck am I thinking?!

Cutting off that train of thought in a hurry, he leapt to his feet.

“Ouch!”

Pain ran through his forehead just as a scream leaked out from Emil.

As he'd tried to rise, his head had collided with Emil's, which had been lowered to peer at Hayato.

“Ouchouchouch, what are you doing so suddenly...”

“That's my line, what on Earth do you think *you're* doing?”

“What's that; it's clearly Hayato's fault, suddenly coming in like that...”

Gazing at the blushing Emil, he realized he'd woken up after collapsing shortly after he'd returned to the room.

“After I collapsed, did you carry me to the bed...?”

“...Yeah...”

Emil's downcast gaze lowered apologetically, and he bowed his head.

He'd been looking after Hayato ever since.

“I'm really sorry. I suddenly lost my head 'cause of that...”

“That's why I told you not to throw it! It was my bag too...”

“Y-you were the one staring at my naked body, so it's your fault really!”

“No one was staring at anything. Besides, that was just an accident of unfortunate timing, right?!”

“Uuh~ Hayato, you should just go hit your thumb on a table leg...”

Pouting, Emil glared at him.

Shortly thereafter—

“Um, well...”

“What?”

“Do you remember how I looked naked?”

“...Eh?”

“How I look naked. Do. You. Remember. —Is what I’m asking!”

“Uhm...”

He desperately tried to recall, but it seemed the memory had fled, probably from the shock of having hit his head twice in rapid succession.

“Thank God...” Emil sighed in relief when he explained.

“Anyway, Hayato. You need to be more careful from now on, alright?”

“Even if you say that, we’re both guys here, so there’s no need for you to get so upset over something so trivial, is there? In the first place, you being that embarrassed about these things is weird.”

“Geez, Hayato just doesn’t get it!”

“What’s there to get...?”

A tense atmosphere filled the room.

A short electronic sound suddenly echoed from Hayato’s PDA, breaking the tension gripping the room.

“What now?”

Picking the PDA up, its screen revealed the arrival of a new message.

“An email? From whom?”

“Let’s see.”

Hayato fiddled clumsily with his PDA.

...I knew it, I'm not very good at this.

“Your girlfriend...?”

“Oh, please. That’s impossible.”

“Impossible? Why?”

“My sister’s been very sick for a long time now. Ever since our parents passed away during the ‘Second Attack’ in Britannia, I’ve had to care for her on my own. I’ve tried my best; I haven’t had time to pay attention to anything else.”

“So Hayato was in Britannia during the ‘Second Attack’...”

“My father’s work put him in Gutenberg. That was really some horrible timing, wasn’t it...”

“Sorry, I asked something I shouldn’t have. But now that you’re here in Little Garden, will your sister be okay?”

“She’s here as well. When I was being scouted by the Warslan Company, they offered my sister world-class medical treatment – free of charge – if I entered the Bugeika. Now, let’s take a look at that mail— Er, it’s from Karen.”

“Is that your sister?”

“Yeah.”

Hayato nodded. As he read his sister’s message, the blood drained from his face.

“...What’s wrong?” Emil asked, tilting his head.

“I promised her I’d visit after the entrance ceremony concluded, but, with all that happened, I totally blanked. She’s pretty mad.”

Figuring it’d be faster to show than to explain, he turned his PDA so that Emil could see.

Emil leaned in for a better look.

Uh— Ah...

A bittersweet fragrance drifted over, causing Hayato's heart to skip a beat. When he'd been pushed down earlier, he'd felt similarly.

In his confounded state, Hayato didn't react as Emil reached for the PDA and went on reading the contents of Karen's message.

Nii-san,

Why didn't you come after your school entrance ceremony? (-_- ✘)

I thought we could have dinner together, and I'd been waiting all this time.....

But now visiting hours are over.....

Your email address is registered in the school's database, so I had Miharu get it for me so I could send this email.

I don't know your phone number; hurry up and let me know already.

If you don't respond right away, I'll put a curse on you!

Karen

“Hahaha, seems like you're in something of a bind, huh? You guys seem pretty close though?”

“Everyone thinks that. Karen can get way scary when she's mad, though; it's a little troublesome.”

“Oh, right; the email just now reminded me – we haven't eaten yet.”

“I'm too tired to feel hungry, so it completely slipped my mind... In any case, if I tried to eat after that brutal training, I'd just throw it back up anyway. I'm not really in the mood for food either, so I'm probably just gonna skip dinner tonight.”

“If that’s how it is, then why don’t we call it a night? Tomorrow’s the big day, after all.”

“Let me just answer this email first. This wouldn’t be the most opportune time to get cursed.”

With help from Emil, Hayato crafted a response email which included an explanation of the situation, an apology toward his sister, and – of course – his phone number.

“Alright then. Let’s head to bed.”

Emil returned to his own bed, and the slightly salty, flower-like aroma faded, leaving Hayato feeling somewhat lonely.

Even for someone with rather feminine features, he inspires some pretty strange feelings in another guy...

Considering the matter, he was rather terrified of the implications of such thoughts.

I can’t let that awake in me. This was simply because that guy came from Britannia; yeah, that was why he resembled the girl from his dreams. He assured himself that that was all that was going on here, stilling his troubled heart.

“K, it’s lights out.”

Emil, having confirmed that Hayato was in his futon, turned off the lights with his PDA.

“Hey, Hayato. Are you still awake?”

Ten minutes had passed since they’d slipped into their futons and exchanged ‘Good night’.

“I’m awake; what’s up?”

He was still unaccustomed to sleeping next to a roommate he'd just met. Moreover, with the thought of tomorrow's duel on his mind, he hadn't been able to fall asleep.

"I asked you about some relationship stuff earlier, right?"

"Wait, don't tell me you still want to talk about that...?"

"We're sleeping side-by-side like this, and you still think this kind of talk is too private – we should try to get to know each other better."

"Now listen here, you..."

Unconsciously, Hayato smiled wryly.

For a second, he'd almost wanted to ask if Emil thought this was a school field trip.

"And, when you say 'each other', I imagine you really mean you're the only one that's going to be asking questions here."

"Hehehe, you got me... But still, would you at least answer one question for me?"

"Hurry up and ask then."

"I've already asked if you're in a relationship, but is there someone you like? Maybe even someone you really like..."

"Nope."

"How about someone you *once* liked?"

"....."

This time, he was at a loss for words.

He thought of the girl.

"What about someone who's on my mind...?" Hayato answered, after a moment's silence.

"Well, tell me about that person. What're they like?"

"Eehm, well, let's see..."

As expected, Emil was really getting into it.

Frankly, he wasn't sure he wanted to answer.

"You won't laugh?" He asked, as if embarrassed.

"I won't laugh," Emil declared firmly.

Reassured, Hayato began to open up, if only a little.

"Well, it's something I've been dreaming about."

Admitting that was embarrassing enough already. Nevertheless, he mustered his courage and continued on.

"It's in your country – Gutenburg – that the girl in my dream appears: the girl who's on my mind."

As he talked, he tried to remember his dream, and as before, got the feeling that she somehow resembled Emil.

"The girl and I were attacked by the Savage, and the girl was injured— and then the dream suddenly ends. I can't remember anything beyond that."

"Are you sure that's just a dream?"

"...Hmm?"

"Hayato, you were in Gutenburg at the time of the 'Second Attack', right? It seems like that could have been something that really happened..."

"I can't honestly say. I sustained a concussion when the Savage attacked us, and my memories of Gutenburg have all since drifted away..."

"If, by some chance, what you see when you sleep is not a dream, but a memory, then I definitely think that girl is alive."

"How can you just declare something like that all of a sudden?"

"Let's put it this way: if she's alive, then wouldn't she want to meet you? That's why she appears in your dream, you see."

"That sounds somewhat occult," Hayato laughed.

"But, if that truly were the case, you'd be happy, right?"

“This wouldn’t be the first time I’ve thought that. That’s also one of the reasons I’ve made my way here.”

“So what do you plan to do about it?”

“I don’t really know; I’m hoping that maybe via some event, or the Savage, or just over time, the memories will return.”

There was one other thing he left unsaid.

If, by some chance, that dream really was a memory, then when the moment came that he was reunited with her once more, he wanted to be sure he wielded the power necessary to protect her. This time, he’d ensure they’d never be separated again—

“If that’s how things turn out – if you could remember something about her – that’d be great.”

“You’re really a good person, you know that?”

“Hehehe, don’t tell me you just noticed?”

“So, is there someone that *you* like?”

“That’s for me to know, and for you to find out.”

“Even though I answered you, you’re keeping things to yourself? That’s pretty unfair of you.”

“Alright then, I’ll tell you this much. I’m the same as you, Hayato.”

“What’s that supposed to...”

“At the time of the ‘Second Attack’, I, too, was separated from someone.”

“And what kind of person were they?”

“That’s a secret.”

“Hey, I answered you properly. Now it’s your turn.”

“I’ll tell you soon enough.”

“You really *do* mean to tell me?”

“Well, probably, anyway,” Emil said with a mischievous laugh.

He likely wasn’t telling the truth.

But, it wasn’t the kind of thing Hayato intended to pry about.

A whirlwind of events had happened today, and the only sleep he’d gotten the day before had been during his trip here.

Just a moment before, he didn’t see how he could possibly fall asleep.

But now, his body demanded rest.

As they’d conversed, his eyelids had gradually grown heavy.

“Right then, I’m just about ready to nod off here.”

“Hey, give it your best tomorrow, alright?”

“You got it...”

With a nod, Hayato closed his eyes and immediately slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 3: Duel/Claire/Confession

With a combination of white noise, light, and warmth calling out to him, Kisaragi Hayato awoke.

“Nnh, uuuuuuuuuuuah.....”

Rising from his futon, he stretched sleepily.

Turning his gaze, he saw the back of his neighbor, sitting on the edge of his bed. He had already swapped his pajama tops for the shirt of their uniform...

He turned his gaze towards his neighbor. The back of Emil, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, could be seen. He had already changed from his pajamas into the uniform's shirt. As far as he could tell, Emil had gotten up some time ago.

Did I oversleep?

Glancing at the clock, it appeared that the appointed time for breakfast in the dorm had already begun; he'd overslept a bit. Hayato turned his gaze toward Emil once more.

What on Earth's going on over there?

Facing toward the window, Emil's back was to Hayato. He didn't seem to have noticed that Hayato had awoken. Instead, he was focused intently on his hands.

“Morning, Emil.”

“UWAA, HAYATO— WHY ARE YOU CALLING OUT ALL OF A SUDDEN—?!”

Seeing that Hayato had called his name, Emil turned his head as if startled.

“M-My bad... Or rather, why'd that shock you so badly—?!”

“I was really concentrating...”

Emil, who was raising his eyebrows, had a uniform nears his knees; a needle spooled with a piece of thread in hand. He had been in the middle of sewing their school badge onto his uniform.

“On sewing something onto your uniform with that needle and thread...?”

“Though fastening it with a pin works as well, this way it won’t come off as easily. If you lose it, the instructions say that you’ll have to write an apology and pay for a new one, so it’s recommended that you sew it on. I’m already finished with yours,” Emil said, handing Hayato his jacket.

“Oh, you did mines for me? Thanks.”

Hayato glanced at the jacket Emil handed him. Indeed, the school badge was now firmly attached to the collar.

“I’m in the middle of putting my own on, so Hayato, go ahead and get rea... O-OW!—”

“What happened? Are you alright?!”

With a shriek, Emil grabbed one of his fingers; his small body curling in pain.

“Ahaha, ’cause I looked away for a sec... my finger – looks like I messed up...”

“Let me see it.”

Hayato drew close to Emil, took hold of his arm, and checked his injury, from which a pea-shaped drop of blood had formed.

“Looks like you pierced yourself fairly deep, huh? Hold still. I’ll treat it now.”

“Treat it? Wait, Hayato—?!” Emil protested in vain as Hayato put the injured finger in his mouth.

Emil’s body trembled in surprise as his mouth flopped open and closed in shock.

“Hey, Hayato... What are you doing all of a sudden... Nnh, aah...”

Each time Hayato sucked and moved his tongue and cheeks, small moans leaked from Emil's mouth.

"This is necessary; we have to disinfect it after all, don't we? Incidentally, stop making that strange sound. It's making me feel weird..."

"F-Feel weird—?"

"D-Don't make me say something like that, alright—"

"Sorry..."

"That should do it."

By the time Hayato, whose face had slightly reddened, parted his mouth from the fingertip of Emil, whose face was flushed, there was no longer any sign of blood.

"We should ask Fritz if there's a first-aid kit somewhere."

"Wait a sec! If it's about a first-aid kit, there's supposed to be one here. If I remember correctly, it should be in the one that's the third from the bottom. I noticed it earlier when I was looking for the sewing kit."

Emil's gaze indicated a set of drawers standing alongside the wall.

"Ah, there it is."

Hayato opened the aforementioned drawer, which indeed contained a first-aid kit. Within were medical supplies such as bandages and disinfectants – just what they needed.

"Right, let me see that finger again."

Hayato snared a piece of cotton swab with a pair of tweezers, and soaking it with disinfectant, proceeded to disinfect Emil's finger.

"...It's not that big a deal. Isn't that a bit much, Hayato?"

"Remember the story I shared yesterday? Ever since that day, when I see a wound, I tend to get a bit upset."

"Ah, so it's like that... that's why you're so used to treating someone, right?"

“I also treated injured children back at the institution where I lived before. Moreover, even if something like this isn’t normally anything to worry about, it’s still best to be sure, right? You wouldn’t want it to get infected— And... done.”

“Thank you...”

Emil, whose finger was now covered with a bandage, spoke words of gratitude.

“I’ll sew your badge on for you later. It’ll be tough with your hand like that.”

“You can’t! Today, Hayato... your duel is today. You can’t afford to get hurt now of all times, so...”

“It’ll be fine, I promise. I’m good with that kind of thing,” Hayato said.

Taking the needle and thread in hand, he picked up the uniform that had been placed atop Emil’s bed and began sewing the badge onto its collar.

Indeed, he seemed to be quite experienced.

“Wow, so it really is something you’re good at, huh, Hayato?”

“I picked that up at the institution as well. It was ‘cause we had no money, you see. Patching up old clothes? That was just a part of life— Alright, here. It’s done.”

“Th-Thank you, for seriously worrying about me.”

“What’s with that?”

Emil started to put on the jacket Hayato had handed him.

“Alright, should I get changed too? It’s about time to go get something to eat right?”

“WAA— HAYATO—! WHY ARE YOU SUDDENLY STRIPPING—?!”

Hayato had put his hands on his undershirt causing Emil to jump and scream in shock. He looked to be trembling quite a bit and his face was dyed a bright red.

“Why am I stripping? How am I supposed to get changed if I don’t?”

“EVEN SO, DON’T DO IT WITHOUT WARNING IN FRONT OF ME!”

“I’m different from you – I don’t mind you seeing me naked.”

“I do! I’ll wait outside!” Emil called out as he dashed out of the room in a hurry.

Seriously, even for a so-called Britannian gentleman, that’s still a bit over the top, isn’t it...?

Musing to himself about the strangeness of the situation, he sighed before once again putting his hands to his undershirt and taking it off.

“I wouldn’t have minded if you had just gone on ahead, you know...?”

Having finished changing, Hayato exited the room only to find Emil waiting for him in the corridor.

“Is that really something you should say to someone who was waiting for you? You’re so cruel, Hayato...” Emil pouted.

“My bad, my bad. Right then, shall we?” Hayato replied as he began walking.

They were suddenly interrupted by the chirping of a PDA.

“A mail notification? Seems it wasn’t mine.”

Hayato proceeded to look at his own PDA. It notified him of an email from the student council president, which read as follows:

[The duel will be held two hours from now.]

[Please come to the front of the Bugeika school building an hour before.]

These two points were clearly outlined in a tone suggesting such a thing was an everyday occurrence.

I'm really going to fight that student council president today...

Hayato heaved a heavy sigh.

He felt burdened by the weight of that knowledge, but needed to steel his resolve nonetheless.

There wasn't much time left – what had to be done, had to be done.

So from now on, I'll need to give things my best effort.

Convincing himself that things would be alright, Hayato walked toward the lobby with Emil at his side.

Following breakfast, Hayato and Emil, who had changed into their uniforms, made their way to the designated spot at the time indicated in the email.

There, one of the student council vice presidents was waiting with her arms crossed – Ridi Steinberg. As soon as she saw Hayato and Emil, her sharp eyes narrowed even further.

“I'll now guide the two of you to the Colosseum.”

“When you say ‘the two of you’, I assume that means it's okay if I go as well, correct?”

“That would be perfectly fine, although it goes without saying that this extends only as far as to the waiting room,” Ridi replied as she began walking.

They were led to the waiting room inside the Colosseum, located a short distance from the Bugeika school building.

It was about ten-tatami mats wide and was empty but for benches along the wall and a few scattered chairs.

“The locker room's next door; please use it as you see fit. You will find your Variable Suit prepared for you there, so please change, and make any necessary adjustments before the match starts. You know how to do so?”

“Yep, I do.”

"If that's the case, then you should be fine on your own, right? Before the match begins, Erica will call on you. As long as you're ready by then, I don't mind whatever else you choose to do. Now then, if you'll excuse me," Ridi remarked, before exiting the room.

"What do you wanna do, Hayato? Get changed right away?"

"Yeah, I'll do that."

dingdong ...

"What's that?"

As they were mulling over what to do next, the intercom that had been installed inside the changing room suddenly sounded.

"Who would that be?"

Tilting his head in puzzlement, Emil operated the monitor of the intercom which had been installed horizontally by the door. The figures of the two freshmen who had been sentenced to leave by the student council president during the school entrance ceremony appeared.

"It's okay to let 'em in, right?"

"Yeah."

Emil opened the door in response to Hayato's nod of affirmation. The two schoolgirls simultaneously called out, 'Pardon the intrusion', and entered the room.

Heading straight over to Hayato, they spoke at the same time.

"It's alright if you don't worry about us, so please don't force yourself!"

"Although we're the ones at fault, Kisaragi-san's the one that's having a hard time. We feel bad and... we think it's not too late for you to just forget about the duel!"

It seemed they had learned of the president's strength, and came to request he call off the duel. They also seemed to have the resolution to leave Little Garden in consequence.

“Please calm down, you two. I don’t think that I can suspend the duel now anyway – the president wouldn’t forgive something like that,” Hayato said in an attempt to calm the two down.

In any case, according to the notification he’d received from the president, it’d soon be time for the duel. Moreover, rather than the girls, Emil had been the direct cause of it.

Adding fuel to the fire, Emil proceeded to comment, “Please calm down, you two. If it’s Hayato, he’ll manage somehow.”

“I already told you to stop talking like that, alright?!”

Hayato retorted in the same manner he had after the school entrance ceremony, filling the waiting room with cheerful laughter.

That seemed to have helped. The gloominess disappeared from the girl’s expressions and Hayato’s nervousness was also lightened. Although Emil did have trouble reading the situation at times, that was countered by occasions like this, where he was the only one able to lighten the mood. Hayato wasn’t decided as to whether the positives outweighed the negatives.

The net result has been rather troublesome, after all...

“Haa,” he sighed.

“Well then, we wouldn’t want to interrupt you any further, so please excuse us.”

“Kisaragi-san, stay safe and give it your best. We’ll be cheering for you from the stands!”

Thirty minutes had passed since the girls had left the room. Ten minutes remained until the scheduled time for the match: 11 o’clock.

Hayato had long since finished changing into his Variable Suit and was now stretching with Emil. Suddenly, on wall opposite them, the door to the corridor opened. The other vice president, Erika Candle, appeared.

“It’s time. Are you finished with your preparations?”

“In just a moment,” Hayato replied as he rose.

Excited roars could be heard in the distance.

“What’s that...?”

“Sounds like Claire-sama’s entry.”

“...Just that warrants that level of noise?”

“It’s not just the students of the Bugeika; the students of the other schools and the people of Little Garden in general idolize Claire-sama as well. She’s tremendously popular,” Erika replied, as if repeating something that was only common sense.

“So that president isn’t just your ordinary creep, eh?”

“There you go again, saying such—”

Erika gave Emil a stern glare.

“Anyone else who’d seen what’d happened at the entrance ceremony would think the same way, you know?.”

“The sternness of that rebuke was for the sake of preventing the loss of so much as a single person on the battlefields to come. That was the manifestation of Claire-sama’s kindness, understand?”

“You really like the president, don’t you, vice?” Emil teased, in response to Erika’s earnest reply.

Erika’s face flushed a deep red in response.

“Th-That’s a given. That person is someone that I know I can rely on...”

She cleared her throat with a cough and tiptoed to the door she had come in through.

“Well then, Kisaragi Hayato – it’s your turn to enter. Let’s go.”

“You’re coming as well?”

“That is because I am to serve as the judge in today’s match...”

“You wouldn’t side with the president out of love, would you?” Emil mocked her once more.

“T-That doesn’t even need to be said. I’d never do something like that to my goddess. It would displease Claire-sama. Not that such a thing would be necessary to begin with. Claire-sama always attains victory without fail, so—”

Erika opened the door before them.

Beyond it lay a 100-meter long passage with a low ceiling.

“Hayato, give it your best.”

Ushered on by Emil’s words of support, Hayato turned to the battlefield, and stepped forth.

There are more spectators than I thought...

Surveying the stands, he found they were filled for the most part.

From all that cheering earlier, the majority of the spectators here seemed to be looking forward to watching the [Perfect Queen]’s battle style.

Fan-made signs and banners were in abundance, and all declared their support for Claire.

The rest seem to be curious about what the rumored freshman is capable of...

On the topic of who was supporting *him*, Fritz, Ridia – even the two girls who had been told by the president to leave the school – and a fair number of the freshmen class were included.

Amid this hostile environment, Hayato turned to the center of the battlefield and advanced.

“...Were you able to prepare yourself?” Claire called out, when the distance between the two had closed to approximately five meters.

She was, of course, wearing a Variable Suit as well. It was the same shade of red her uniform had been.

“Well, as might be expected, all this commotion has caught me off guard a bit.”

Hayato answered Claire’s question with a wry smile.

“That kind of thing... Once the duel starts, that kind of thinking could get you killed.”

A chuckle slipped out of Claire’s mouth, then she continued, “In any case, could you not stare?”

“...Eh?”

“You were eyeing me right now... with that lewd gaze...”

“TH-THEAT’S—”

He couldn’t deny it.

The Variable Suit clung to her body, showing off her well-developed, womanly curves. It also exposed more skin than either Emil’s or Hayato’s. Not just her sides, even her shoulders were exposed too.

The two big bulges of her breasts and her figure, which made it impossible to deny her femininity, were so charming that his heart caught in his throat.

“...I was just joking, but shaking like that, you’re still a long way off from being ready to stand on the battlefield, aren’t you?”

He didn’t try to deny it. It was the true that he was fascinated.

“Well then, shall I deploy my Hundred?”

She didn’t bother to wait for a reply. Claire flipped the Hundred she grasped in her hand lightly into the air.

“HUNDRED ON!”

Alongside her shout, the Hundred released an emerald green light which transformed into six, red gun pods.

So this is President’s Hundred, [Alystherion]...?

The objects hovering around Claire's body were considerably larger than those from Emil's [Arms Shroud] and looked ready to fire without the modification that Emil's had required. At any rate, a handful of turret-like objects had now attached themselves to her person.

The muzzles of the weapons in question were rather wide, and so it seemed likely the beams they fired would be quite powerful indeed.

"Now it's your turn to deploy your Hundred."

"I know that already."

He was so nervous that his voice almost visibly shook.

However, it didn't need to be said that failure here was a luxury he couldn't afford.

Failing to correctly deploy his Hundred would be pretty pathetic, and would dampen the lively atmosphere.

It will be okay.

Reassuring himself, he unfastened the pendant to which his Hundred was attached from his neck and gripped it tightly.

"HUNDRED ON!"

As he shouted, the Hundred glittered a brilliant red from inside his hand. It reacted to Hayato's shout and began its transformation.

At least that part went well...

Glancing at [Hien], which had manifested in his right hand, Hayato breathed a sigh of relief. The protector that covered his right arm had also deployed like the day before.

"The duel between the student council president, Claire Harvey, and the freshman, Kisaragi Hayato, will now commence," Erika pronounced, acting in her role as referee for the match.

Her voice echoed forth from the speakers installed around the colosseum.

“However, before we begin – seeing as there are many freshmen present today – I ask your patience as we first outline the rules. The time limit on the match will be 15 minutes. A knockout, surrender, or the depletion of either Vitality or Energy will be the means for determining victory and defeat.”

Together with Erika’s explanation, the rules were also shown on the electronic scoreboard installed above the spectator stands. In the event time ran out without a clear victor, the person with more Vitality remaining would win.

“The counts for remaining time, Vitality, and Energy are displayed on the electronic scoreboard with data drawn from the four Vital Rings that are attached to each Slayers’ hands and feet. The audience may thus confirm their current values at all times— That’s all there is to explain; Hayato-sama, do you have any questions?”

“Nope, nothing in particular. Put simply, the one who falls unconsciousness or loses their weapon loses, right?” Hayato replied

Claire suddenly raised her hand.

“Would it be alright if I added a condition?”

“...Claire-sama, what might that be?”

“This is something I’ve pondered since yesterday. Even if Kisaragi Hayato may have the highest aptitude reading currently; in practice, yesterday was his first time handling the Hundred, correct? If I were to fight such an opponent with my full power, I do not think it would be much of a match. I believe a handicap is necessary.”

“A handicap...?”

That would be helpful.

He’d take whatever he could get.

“And what form will that handicap take?”

“What if I were to forego the usage of Full-body Armament?”

“...Full-body Armament...?”

“Ridiculous – don’t tell me you don’t know what Zenshin Busou is? It should be described in the preparatory materials you were given before you arrived here.”

“Um, if I remember correctly, the current deployment form is Bare Armament or something like that...” Hayato replied, attempting to recall the contents of the book.

“That is correct.”

Claire nodded in satisfaction.

“The Bare Armament you have deployed now only utilizes a small portion of your Energy. The difference is that Zenshin Busou requires an instantaneous release of all your Energy at once as you manifest your weapon.”

It was a powerful ability, but the Energy requirements were extraordinary, and thus it couldn’t be used for long. Worse, it placed a heavy burden on the body and was tremendously difficult to control.

Claire was the first student to be able to use the Zenshin Busou, as well as being the only member of the student council who could.

“In other words, originally you might employ Zenshin Busou in a duel, but you won’t in this one?”

“That’s correct. Facing an opponent who can’t use Zenshin Busou, even if I were to obtain victory with its use, it’d be meaningless.”

“Just to double check – you won’t use this as a pretext to break our promise if you lose, right?”

“Of course not.”

Erika didn’t object to the exchange.

“Well then, let’s begin the duel. Both of you, please place some distance between you and face one another,” Erika directed, as she moved toward a corner of the field.

As per her instructions, Claire and Hayato backed up until there was roughly ten meters between them and turned to face each other.

“Now, let the duel commence!”

Triggered by Erika’s shout, a countdown began on the electronic scoreboard.

Starting at [10], it then turned to [9].

He had now passed the point of no return. All that was left to do was execute the strategy Emil had devised—

—Which was to rely on his natural agility to charge the moment the duel began, allowing that single moment to decide victory or defeat.

As his opponent was a skilled master of the Hundred, a long, drawn-out battle was to his disadvantage. If things reached that point, any hope of victory might well disappear.

This was what Emil had foreseen.

The moment before [6] turned to [5], Hayato filled [Hien] with his Energy and began to concentrate it underneath his feet.

Concentrate, I must concentrate...

The sound of cheers faded into the background.

All he could here was the loud thumping of his pounding heart.

[3], [2], [1], the countdown approached zero.

And—

“Come, Kisaragi Hayato! Show me what you can do!” Claire shouted as she fired [Alystherion] in his direction.

I'll be fine. It'll work! Hayato assured himself.

He’d learned how to deal with Dragoon-class Hundreds the day before, so he ought to be able to handle it.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!—”

Hayato released the Energy under his feet, initiated Accelerate, and flew.

A swift attack in accordance with the devised strategy.

Dodging the six beams coming from [Alystherion], he closed the gap between Claire and himself in a single movement.

[Hien], of course, had already been charged with energy, and its blade glowed bluish-white.

“Wha—?!”

Her eyes widening in surprise, Claire was caught off-guard. Emil's blitzkrieg plan had worked, but unfortunately his execution had left something to be desired...

...*Oh crap!*

Overexcited, his control over his Energy was poor.

And so, his deceleration was late.

“KYA—!”

Claire shrieked.

“UWA—?!”

As did Hayato.

CLASH—!

Having exerted more force than intended, Hayato crashed into Claire. Consequently, as if shoved to the ground, Claire collapsed onto the floor.

Ouch... Crap, did I screw up...?

They had completely collapsed.

The spectators roared with laughter.

Frankly, it was incredibly embarrassing.

“Th—! Kisaragi Hayato—! You, where do you think you’re touching?!”

“...Eh?”

Because of her words, Hayato finally noticed the warmth in his hands.

This couldn't possibly...

Moving his fingers, a soft sensation was transmitted through his fingertips.

“H-Hann!”

A bewitching sound poured forth from Claire's mouth.

Hayato suddenly realized what he'd touched – Queen Claire Harvey's voluminous *breasts*.

“E-Eeehm...”

“Y-You... What on Earth do you think you're...”

Claire's face was dyed a deep red as she raised her eyebrows.

“T-The Variable Suit should be worn to soften incoming attacks, so why is it so thin? The sensation of your breasts is as if there was nothing there...”

“Han—!”

Once again Hayato moved the fingers of his hands, and alongside a bouncy sensation, Claire's captivating voice erupted once more. Her body lost its strength. However, that was only for a moment.

“—!”

Claire turned towards Hayato again and glared at him sharply.

O-Ohoh...

Hayato panicked and released his hands from her breasts.

“Eeehm, my bad. I'm *really* sorry. Can't you forgive this... accident...?”

Hayato laughed nervously. The grim look on Claire's face gave him goosebumps.

“O-OF COURSE THIS WON'T EVER BE FORGIVEN—!”

With tears in her eyes, Claire Harvey thrust Hayato away with both hands and forcefully stood up.

“For someone else to touch my b-breasts... This hasn’t happened *once* before, and yet in the middle of a duel... I’m touched this way! And on top of that, not once, but t-twice—!”

Trying to preserve her dignity as the Queen, Claire crossed both arms in front of her breasts, her shoulders quivering violently.

“You’ve got some nerve, haven’t you, Kisaragi Hayato? Don’t expect any mercy from now on—!”

Uh oh. Claire pointed toward Hayato.

As declared, she manipulated [Alystherion], firing six full-powered beams his way.

“U-UWAA—!”

Hayato was only just able to dodge. From Claire’s behavior, he didn’t get the feeling she even knew what the word “mercy” meant anyway. Here, on the battlefield, stood the war princess herself.

“So all you know how to do is run, huh, Kisaragi Hayato! That’s all you can really do!”

“Wha—”

Closing in on Hayato, who was dodging her beams, she struck with her fist.

Oh shi—!

He raised his guard, but that fist’s power was the real deal. His guard, utilizing his arm protector, was blown away and her fist sunk into his solar plexus.

“Gu—”

With that, Hayato’s balance was destroyed and Claire pursued further. Twisting her body, she hit with a roundhouse kick.

Hayato, who had received a direct hit, scattered dust as he slid along the ground.

“Such a look of surprise. Did you really come into this thinking that I wouldn’t know close quarters combat?” Claire asked Hayato, who struggled to stand up. “Even though I can use a Hundred, I still studied self-defense to safeguard my close surroundings. Martial arts is the basic among basics when it comes to combat; it’s possible to clad one’s fists and feet with Energy after all.”

She showed a cocky smile.

“Well then, shall we end this?”

“Ku—”

Hayato had somehow managed to stand, but his posture was unstable. Claire activated [Alystherion], which fired beams in rapid succession.

“Hayato, quick! Form an E-Barrier and defend!”

“...Eh?”

While confused by the voice he could suddenly hear, Hayato nonetheless released Energy from his body and a E-Barrier expanded in front of his eyes.

He was able to protect himself from all the incoming beams.

“Are you alright, Hayato?” he heard Emil ask.

“Y-Yeah... If it wasn’t for your advice I’d be... Wait, how are you talking to me?”

“On your arm, there’s a Vital Ring right? I can communicate with you using that.”

Certainly, as described, the voice came from the ring that had been placed on his right arm.

“So that kind of thing’s possible...”

When Meimei had given it to him, he had only heard that it measured the remaining Vital and Energy, wirelessly transmitting the values to [LiZA]. He was surprised.

“There is a function installed on it that allows comrades to keep in touch during battle. That’s what I’m utilizing right now.”

The sound of footsteps and a door opening could be heard from the ring.

“Emil Crossfield, what on Earth do you think you’re doing?!”

Erika’s voice was heard.

“What am I doing? Hayato’s an amateur at using the Hundred. He messed up Energy management and you saw that he even collided with the president right? That’s why I thought, ‘Why not give him a little advice?’”

“No one’s ever done anything like this before; you know there’s no way we would allow this. Afterwards, some sort of punishment—”

“I’ll allow it.”

Claire interrupted the two.

“But... Claire-sama...”

“If it enables Kisaragi Hayato to demonstrate the full extent of his abilities, I’ll allow it,” Claire declared flatly.

“The one speaking is Emil Crossford, correct? You might have a bit of Hundred combat experience; however, you’re nothing more than a freshman. That hardly changes things. Let’s resume the match.”

“Understood.”

She appeared reluctant, but Erika accepted it and Hayato heaved an inward sigh of relief.

The blitzkrieg strategy had failed, but if Emil instructed him, he could still fight on.

That was what he believed.

“Thanks.”

Hayato faced Claire and spoke his gratitude.

“You’re welcome. Now then, here I come—!”

Claire began attacking with [Alystherion] once again.

“Hayato, form an E-Barrier!”

“Yeah!”

Per Emil’s instructions, Hayato formed an E-Barrier and blocked the beam that came flying in.

“Emil, next one!”

“Going off what Prez said a little while ago, if you keep on evading, you’ll eventually tire and then you’ll be a sitting duck. That’s why even though the strategy’s already failed once, we’re going to try it again.”

Even if the president was versed in self-defense, fundamentally her bodily physique was light.

If he bestowed Energy on [Hien], persistent attacks would accumulate damage on her even through her E-Barrier – was Emil’s thinking.

“Also, Prez’s [Alystherion] doesn’t work autonomously. It has to be consciously manipulated with Energy that comes from her. If you disturb her concentration, you should be able to lock it down.”

“In other words, it’s best to go on the offensive?”

“Yeah, should be.”

“Right then, let’s give it a try!”

Hayato Accelerated once more, and, blocking all incoming beams with an E-barrier while dodging again and again, closed in on Claire and swiped at her.

“—How’s that—!”

Things went differently this time as opposed to when the match had begun. As in practice, he was able to swing [Hien], which he had bestowed Energy on, skillfully downward.

“...Ku—!”

However, Claire blocked his attack with a single arm.

“Hayato, again!”

“You don’t need to tell me that!”

Hayato raised his sword and went in for a follow-up attack.

However, she jumped behind him and thus evaded it.

Claire took careful aim, activated [Alystherion], and began her counterattack.

He concentrated Energy underneath his feet in an explosive leap that cleared him of her attack.

“Perfect timing, Hayato. Let’s try *that* next! Hit her directly with your Energy!”

“Got it!”

He’d only ever once managed to pull it off successfully, but that was good enough for now.

It was still worth trying.

“UUUOOOOO—————!”

Shouting a warcry, Hayato poured Energy into [Hien] which he had raised high into the air.

A vortex of blue light formed, coiling around the sword like a snake.

“HAYATO, GOOOOOO———!”

Urged on by Emil’s shout, Hayato slashed with [Hien], forming a giant, crimson Energy burst that flew in Claire’s direction.

The technique was a success!

Just before it would’ve reached Claire, however, it dispersed harmlessly.

In Hayato’s eyes a flower bud-like figure was reflected – [Alystherion].

The “petals” opened as if blossoming, revealing Claire, completely unharmed.

“You’ve exceeded my expectations, Kisaragi Hayato! Frankly, I’m quite surprised. This fight has been worth it to see your true strength!”

As she shouted, six of the floating gun pods moved.

“—However, you’ll now receive the punishment for playing with my breasts!”

“I already told you that I’m sorry—!”

“My breasts are not so cheap that you can simply apologize—!”

Before he’d realized what was happening, [Alystherion] had him completely surrounded just as gravity began to exert its claim upon him once more.

“Seeing as you only began to use the Hundred yesterday, you won’t be able to dodge in mid-air!”

Oh crap—

It was just as Claire described. He was unable to alter his course to either the left or the right while in the air, let alone pull back.

“This is the end—!”

“Hayato—!”

Alongside Emil’s heartrending cry, several beams flew in Hayato’s direction.

“—Ku...”

He’d been able to protect himself from the first few shots with an E-Barrier, but that was his limit. Before long, the E-Barrier was destroyed and Hayato’s body was hit directly.

Hayato’s body, held in the air by the continuous impacts of the beams, hit the ground before long.

“How’s that? You done?” Claire asked.

She was standing above Hayato and looking down upon him as he lay upside-down on the floor.

He was still conscious.

However, he had also suffered the impact from crashing into the ground.

His body screamed in pain—

“No, not yet...”

Hayato tried to stand.

Giving up was not an option.

After all, if was going to lose, he wanted to lose by fighting until the bitter end.

If he didn’t, he wouldn’t be able to face Emil, who had kept him company during yesterday’s practice, and the two girls who had worried for him.

That’s why—

“Hayato...”

Emil’s worried voice could be heard from the ring.

A tone that seemed to imply, ‘It’s okay to give up.’

However, such a thought never entered his mind as he endured the pain and rose to his feet.

Seeing the state he was in, Claire heaved an astonished sigh.

“If that’s how you’re going to be, then at least let me end this—”

She combined the six floating gun pods into one giant rifle.

What the heck... So she can even do something like that... Hayato muttered in his mind.

Although, on that note, Emil had also been able to change his weapon. Moreover, he’d said that other Slayers would also be able possess this ability.

That Claire was one such wasn't that hard to imagine.

"This is the Buster Cannon. It boasts enough firepower to incapacitate even the Savage should it hit directly," she said with a provocative smile.

The barrel of the Buster Cannon was long and its muzzle wide.

It was large enough that it had to be carried with both arms.

"It's unfortunate, but with this, the match is decided."

As light began to gather within the muzzle of the Buster Cannon...

THUMP—!

His heart thumped loudly in his ears.

...What... is this...?

THUMP, *THUMP*—!

Twice this time.

What is this...?

My body... feels hot...

His blood boiled and he felt the impulse to rampage.

"Hayato, can you hear me, Haya... to...!"

The voice of Emil, communicating with him via the Vital Ring, grew slower and slower.

Thump, thump, thump.

The throbbing and his consciousness gradually faded--

...And simultaneously...

Kisaragi Hayato's eyes turned golden.

※※※

“Wha—?!”

Because Claire couldn't conceive of Hayato possibly dodging the bombardment in that situation, she doubted her own eyes.

It was indisputable, however, that he had not only dodged, but had also begun to attack with unbelievable speed.

“...Ku—!”

Kisaragi Hayato's sword, which he held level with the ground, approached her.

Stepping back, she dodged as the sword swung down from above.

It had only missed by a hair's breadth.

The sword violently impacted the ground, forcing a cloud of dust into the air and left a large crater where it had struck.

What's with this speed and power...

Both could not be more different from when the fight had begun.

If she were to take a direct blow now, it might even be fatal.

Impossible; to think that someone has appeared who – even if for just an instant – made me consider the possibility of losing—

As far as Little Garden was concerned...



No, even as far as the world was concerned, this wasn't something she could just accept.

With this in mind, she roared, "There's no way I can lose—!"

To lose to a freshman who had barely received his personal Hundred the day before... This was unacceptable for the one who was both president of the student council as well as the Queen. But above all else, this was not something Claire Harvey would allow. It would be a blemish on her dignity as the head of the Bugeika.

That said, it doesn't look like he'll go down easily...

Kisaragi Hayato's attacks came fast and heavy, chipping away at her stamina little by little. Given the situation, staying on the defensive just wasn't an option.

"If you're going to go all out, then I shall as well!"

Claire focused her Energy into an Accelerate, opening some distance between Kisaragi Hayato and herself.

Readyng his sword, Hayato pursued.

Seeing that he'd taken the bait, Claire, grinning like the Cheshire Cat, charged her Booster Cannon with Energy once more.

"This time, I will absolutely hit my mark—!"

The shot, after all, would be made from point-blank range.

To this day, there hadn't been a single person who'd received this attack from this range and still stood afterward. She had confidence that this technique would slaughter even the Savage.

"Claire-sama, at this range, you risk killing him!" Ridia screamed from far away.

Claire agreed.

But, if it's the current Kisaragi Hayato I'm dealing with—

He wouldn't be like those before, and more than likely, would not be knocked down.

If she attacked the normal way, he'd just dodge it.

Given that—

It's because I've determined him to be someone who warrants my full strength that I've decided on this technique.

“Eat this, Kisaragi Hayato!”

Just as the person in question was about to slash her with his sword, Claire loosed the entirety of the energy that had been gathering in the muzzle of her Buster Cannon.

Instantly, his entire body was engulfed in an intense white light.

“*Haa*, *haa*... How's... that?”

Claire roughly controlled her breathing.

With this, the battle should be over...

As the debris created by the explosion cleared, she was certain what would appear before her eyes would be the figure of a collapsed Kisaragi Hayato—

“This has to be a lie, right...?”

Claire couldn't believe her eyes.

Not only because he was still there, standing.

But because the form of his weapon had changed entirely.

The rugged armor that had previously covered only his right arm now included his left arm and both legs too – it now covered his entire frame. For that reason, he now appeared several times larger.

“...Full-Body... Armament...?”

Given the scene before her, she could come up with no other explanation.

She'd been labeled a genius for having required only a month to reach that state with her Hundred.

For that reason, what was happening before her eyes simply could not be true.

Moreover, to suffer a direct hit from the Buster Cannon and come out unharmed? That was impossible. It didn't look like he'd used an E-Barrier; in the first place, it didn't look as if he'd used Energy at all. Stranger still, he appeared to have completely nullified the attack itself.

Only one possibility came to mind.

Could it have been... an N-Barrier...?

Generally speaking, there were two types of barriers.

The first type utilized a screen of Energy to defend against an opponent's Energy attack, diffusing the force of the blow – the Energy Barrier, a.k.a. E-Barrier.

The other type was the Neutral Barrier, or the so-called N-Barrier. This type counteracted the opponent's Energy, neutralizing it completely. This was the type that Kisaragi Hayato had apparently just employed.

Claire had heard nothing of his ability to use something like the N-Barrier, let alone the Full-Body Armament.

—*Damn it!*

This wasn't the kind of situation where she could afford to stand around in a daze.

Before she'd realized what had happened, a sword clad in red Energy had appeared before her eyes.

It seemed an impossible task to dodge given the circumstances; even taking a defensive stance on such short notice was expecting too much.

Furthermore, even though the Hundred covering his body was massive, his speed was increased yet further still. The size of his sword made it powerful, but through the Energy that had been imbued into it, it had

become even more so. It didn't seem possible to defend against such an attack with an E-Barrier.

I'm... losing...?

She had never once, until now, ever felt cornered in a fight. Not by the Savage and most definitely not by a human.

The crown of the 'Perfect Queen' began to sway for the first time ever.

"... How could I, the QUEEN, lose to a mere FRESHMAN?!"

Claire shouted as a dazzling light was released from her body..

She had long since let go of the idea of a handicap.

The only thing that could stand against a Full-Body Armament was another Full-Body Armament.

As the light disappeared, protectors dyed in her signature crimson color appeared on both her arms and legs, though not nearly as massive as Hayato's. On her back, tiny thrusters appeared as well.

"Come forth, my Petals—!" Claire yelled.

Her shift to Full-Body Armament having completed, she quickly used an Accelerate and dodged Hayato's attack.

The top of the thrusters on her back opened, from which tiny, floating gun pods (Petals) scattered and surrounded Hayato's body.

There were roughly ten of them.

"And with this, it's over, Kisaragi Hayato—!"

With that voice as a signal, simultaneously from each and every Petal, a beam was released. It was a veritable storm of lasers.

In such a situation, even Kisaragi Hayato ought to be at the end of his rope.

Even when facing an N-Barrier, if that many beams are fired, at least some of them should punch through!

The N-Barrier nullified the first few shots.

However, just as Claire had surmised, the concentrated storm of fire pierced through the N-Barrier before long.

She took advantage of the opening, targeting it with the enormous Buster Cannon which had appeared on her right arm.

[Alystherion], or rather the six gun batteries had joined together to form it.

Precisely because this was a Full-Body Armament, it was considerably larger than the one Hayato had faced moments ago, and boasted an increased firepower commensurate with its larger size.

“This is the end—!”

Turning toward Hayato, she released the gathered Energy all at once.

There was no time to deploy either an N- or an E-Barrier.

I did it!

The enormous beam which erupted from the Buster Cannon hit its target directly.

Caught in the middle of a violent explosion which reduced even the ground beneath his feet to rubble, Hayato collapsed.

Confirming the result, Claire breathed in. A buzzer sounded throughout the arena announcing that Kisaragi Hayato’s stamina had zeroed out while the electronic scoreboard proclaimed “Claire Harvey wins”.

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“Hayato—!”

Emil Crossford caused a stir in the stands as he rushed out to the battlefield.

Hayato, who had collapsed in the center of the ring, wasn’t moving and his Hundred had already ceased to function. These signs were worrying to Emil, but as he closed in, it became clear that he was still breathing.

“Thank God...”

Emil sighed in relief.

Erika Candle soon joined Emil on the battlefield. On her face was a look of distaste and bewilderment – as the judge, she could not declare Claire's victory.

Ridia Steinberg, who had been waiting in the wings of the battle arena, agreed. With a bitter expression, her shoulders shaking uncertainly, she gazed at Claire, whom had found her breath again.

"Hey, I wanna say something real quick!"

Emil glared at Claire sternly. Since Hayato was leaving the Colosseum on a stretcher, he felt free to flare up.

"Emil, calm down. She'll surely listen, you know?"

The one who had spoken as well as stopped Emil was the woman in the white coat— Charlotte Dymandias. She had come onto the battlefield alongside the first aid team.

Next, Charlotte's gaze turned to Erika.

"How 'bout it – mind leaving the decision to me?"

"...Understood."

After several seconds of silence, Erika nodded her agreement and Charlotte turned to the stands and raised her voice.

"Dear members of the audience, I must apologize for ruining your excitement, but as Little Garden's main technologist, I – Charlotte Dymandias – raise an objection to this duel."

Charlotte's voice echoed throughout the colosseum. The audience fell silent.

"First, regarding the conditions negotiated prior to the duel. Claire Harvey has employed the Full-Body Armament. Before the match, she personally declared that the Bare Armament would more than suffice and thus restricted herself to its usage. This rule she violated."

As the crowd began to cry out, Charlotte's speech continued.

“...Nevertheless, this handicap was made under the premise that Kisaragi Hayato was similarly unable to deploy the Full-Body Armament. Furthermore, even before his use of the Full-Body Armament, he and Emil Crossford were in constant communication throughout the duel. While this isn’t technically a violation of rules, it is nonetheless a gray area – and a dark one at that.”

In short, both had erred.

“Finally, the condition attached to the duel is one which had no bearing on the outcome of the duel in question. The rules state that the outcome alone determines the victor, and therefore, in accordance with that outcome, Claire Harvey wi—”

“Hold it right there, Charlotte Dymandias:”

Just as Charlotte was about to declare the Queen’s victory, the one who cut her off was the party in question – Claire herself.

“This match is my loss.”

The crowd roared. The Perfect Queen had personally accepted defeat, so such a reaction was only natural.

“What do you mean by that, Claire Harvey?”

“Your logic is indeed sound: going by the rules, I have won. However, in doing so, I have violated the rule that I personally imposed upon myself. In such an instance, even if you declare me the victor, it does nothing to change the fact that I personally feel I have lost. That alone is enough.”

“Those are simply your feelings on the matter. If you nevertheless find this result difficult to swallow, then we could call the match a draw?”

“Do as you’d like.”

Claire turned to leave.

“Of all of your duels I’ve seen so far, this was the most interesting one,” Charlotte said, a broad grin on her face.

“...Please keep your thoughts to yourself, Charlotte Dymandias,” Claire muttered grimly without turning.

And so the duel between Claire Harvey and Kisaragi Hayato ended in a draw despite the latter ending up in the hospital.

※※※

...What...?

Where is this?

A sharp smell filled his nose – the same smell he’d experienced when visiting his sister soon after he’d arrived.

A hospital then...?

He tried to move, but his body refused to comply. Both his consciousness and vision were faint as well.

His muddled senses notwithstanding, he nevertheless felt the impression that someone’s face drew near.

It drew slowly closer—

“Sorry, Hayato...”

He felt a gentle touch on his lips.

Was that now...

All strength left his body alongside a feverish feeling.

What is this person doing...?

Was this reality or was he simply dreaming?

He couldn’t tell in his current state, he thought, before soon fading into unconsciousness once more.

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“N, nnn....”

It wasn't until a few hours later that Hayato finally regained consciousness completely.

With a weak groan, he opened his eyelids.

So it really was a hospital...

A surprisingly gloomy one.

“...How long have I been out?”

“About six hours.”

He turned to the voice.

Sitting up in surprise, he found Queen Claire Harvey sitting by his bedside.

“P-Pres?”

As his eyes found her face, he remembered their duel.

“I lost, huh...”

His consciousness was faint and his head heavy while his memories of the duel were vague from the midway point on. Looking himself over carefully, he saw that he'd been changed from his Variable Suit into a t-shirt and pants, though he couldn't see the latter.

“No, it was a draw.”

He was bewildered by the unexpected reply.

“What do you—”

He was then taught the astonishing truth.

How he had both employed the Full-Body Armament himself and defended against the Perfect Queen's – Claire Harvey's – Buster Cannon with something called an N-Barrier.

“N-Barrier, Full-Body Armament... was that really me?”

Even if someone else was the one telling him, it was hard to believe.

“You don’t remember?”

Hayato nodded.

His memories were clear up until the point where he was driven into a corner, with the president’s muzzle directed at him.

“You did all that while unaware...?”

“It looks like I did, I’m sorry to say.”

“Kisaragi Hayato, what on Earth are you? Something like that shouldn’t happen with high readings alone.”

“That’s what I want to say, but...”

He was struck with a sudden recollection.

Just as he’d been cornered by Claire, his heart had pounded with great vigor and he’d felt as if he’d lost control of his own body.

...What... was that?

Just as Hayato was about to ask her opinion, the door swung open.

“What’s Prez doing here?!”

Emil had entered the room and promptly stomped his way over to Claire.

“Even after sending Hayato to the hospital by breaking your promise, you’re still not done, huh?”

“No, I’ve simply come to apo—”

“If that’s the case, then another time, okay? Hayato’s still not well, so...”

Emil tried to hide his look of concern.

Hayato’s condition must have been poor indeed.

“...I understand. There’s more I wanted to ask, but that can wait until my next visit.”

With a sigh, Claire stood.

“I’m sorry about this,” Hayato called out to Claire, who had turned and left for the hallway.

“No, I’m the one in the wrong here.”

Claire had paused for a moment as she’d answered, but she left the hospital room immediately after.

“...So, what brings you here?” Hayato asked Emil.

“‘What’, you say... I’ve been here ever since they brought you in, you know?”

Emil indicated the chair that Claire had been using a moment ago.

“I’ve been reporting back to Charl on your condition once an hour. I’d never have guessed that she’d show up in the meantime... How do you feel? Better, I hope.”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Nothing hurts, at least.”

“That’s great. Your brain doesn’t show any abnormalities either, so you should be good to go back to the dorms if you want, according to Charl. What do you want to do? If you’re not feeling up to it, there’s nothing wrong with spending the night here. I could even keep you company if you want?”

“Keep me company? Where would you sleep?”

It was a one person room. Hayato’s was the only bed.

“Good point... I’m guessing you’re against us sharing the bed?”

“Of course! I’d like to bathe, so let’s head back to the dorm, alright? But before that, there’s something I want to ask?”

“...What?”

It was what he’d wanted to ask the president earlier.

He’d been connected with Emil through his Variable Suit’s wireless, so Emil had likely noticed his change. Given how much Emil seemed to know about the Hundred, Hayato figured he might know something.

On that premise, Hayato continued.

“When Prez aimed that huge rifle at me, I was in trouble, you know? At that time my heart started to pound and my body got really hot...”

Hayato relived the incident as he narrated.

“Once that happened, it felt like I’d lost control over my own body. Now that I think about it, you shouted my name then, didn’t you?”

“So you remember that...”

“You noticed something was wrong, didn’t you?”

“...Yeah.”

Emil nodded and continued.

“What I’m about to say... don’t let Pres know, alright?”

“I was just about to ask her before you walked in, though. You interrupted me.”

“If that’s the case, then I’m glad. Talk about a close call.”

Emil sighed, relieved.

“What do you mean by that? Do you know something?”

“I do.”

“Seriously—?!”

“Hayato, hold it... Suddenly doing... Hey, wawa—?!”

Putting both his hands on Emil’s shoulders, Hayato drew in close with a serious look on his face. Emil blushed furiously and, while retreating, lost his balance.

BAM!

Because he’d been forcefully gripping Emil’s shoulders, once Emil lost his balance, they both collapsed into a heap on the floor.

“Ouch, sorry... Again...”

As he spoke, Hayato put his hands on the ground for support, and lifted himself up.

“Wait, Hayato... Where... are you touching...”

“Eh?”

“Your hands! Look at where you’re putting your hands—!”

Hayato suddenly realized that his right hand was touching Emil’s chest.

“Oh, sorry... Nothing to worry about between two guys, though, thankfully. It’s not like you’re Prez, after all.”

Hayato took hold of Emil’s arms as he tried to rise.

“KYAA—!”

A shriek escaped from Emil.

“Again with the strange noises...” Hayato commented, somewhat taken aback. “But still, your body’s just as soft as the Prez’s – are you really training properly?”

“—Th— Nnn—!”

He prodded Emil’s soft arms, causing a seductive voice to escape Emil’s mouth.

“Cut it out with the strange sounds already...”

“H-HAYATO, YOU IDIOT—————!”

WHAAAAAAAAAAP...

Emil’s palm struck Hayato’s face.

“Hayato... idiot...”

“...Eh?”

He could see a few tears leaking from the corner of Emil’s eyes.

“What’s wrong now...?”

“Have you seriously not noticed already?”

“Noticed...?”

“I guess I’m asking too much, though, aren’t I?”

“Um, it seems like you’re trying to tell me something, but...”

“Just a sec. If someone were to overhear this, things could get out of hand, so I’m going to lock the door first, alright?”

“That’s okay with me, but...”

As promised, Emil locked the door.

The normally cheerful Emil now bore a serious expression on his face. That, more than anything, worried Hayato.

“Okay, Hayato, you can’t tell anyone about what I’m about to share with you. Promise me. I won’t answer your question unless you do.”

“What the heck’s the matter with you all of a sudden? Putting on airs like that...”

“What’s it going to be? Do you promise?”

“I do, but...”

“...Really?”

“We’re roommates, after all, aren’t we? I’ll never speak a word of this to another person; I promise.”

Plus, he really wanted to know about that mysterious phenomena when he tried to lift up his body.

“Then turn around for a second and wait.”

Although he wanted to ask why, he instead held his silence and did as he was told, sitting on the bed with his back to Emil.

“Don’t you *dare* turn around, got it?”

“I get it already, geez.”

Just as he finished speaking, the sound of rustling clothes reached his ear.

“What on Earth are you doing now...?”

“You’re not looking, right? Don’t move until I tell you.”

“I know, I know...”

A minute passed before the silence in the room was broken...

“To be honest with you, Hayato, I’ve lied to you.”

A surprisingly earnest voice drifted over from behind him.

“I suppose I should have been straight with you, but I lacked the courage, not to mention you didn’t seem to have remembered.”

“Wait, what...?”

“You can turn around now.”

Hayato was finally given permission to turn around. As he did so, he couldn’t believe his eyes.

It wasn’t just that Emil had let down his hair. Just that wasn’t enough to surprise him; he’d already seen him that way, after all, and each time he’d been struck with the impression that Emil’s looks were rather feminine.

This time, however, he couldn’t see anything but an actual girl.

“The heck is this...?” Hayato muttered, his gaze fixated on Emil’s chest, illuminated by the moonlight shining through the hospital room window.

What he was referring to were the two fruit-sized bulges on Emil’s chest which ought not be there.

“Even seeing me like this, you still don’t get it...”

“Don’t get it?” What am I not getting?”

“Geez, Hayato, you’re duller than I thought. In that case, how’s this?”

With a demure look, Emil lifted up his shirt, exposing his abdomen, revealing a lovely, white-skinned navel.

And the barest glimpse of her breasts.

The sight was too stimulating...

Blushing, Hayato quickly averted his gaze.

If he hadn't, he felt he'd have lost all reason.

However—

He'd realized the threat in time to avert that ill fate.

A scar ran down her abdomen from her chest to her stomach.

A scar that was located exactly where the girl from his dream had been wounded by the pincered claws of a Savage.



“Are you—”

He unconsciously rose to his feet.

Could Emil truly be the girl from his dreams?

Just as he was on the verge of voicing that thought, his memories of his time in Gutenberg returned.

That's right. I met this person – Emil – in Gutenberg.

No, wait. That wasn't quite right. Hayato corrected himself.

Her name... wasn't Emil.

Right. If I remember correctly, her name was—

“...Emilia, right?”

Emilia Hammett.

That was her name.

“So you do remember.”

Emilia's voice – the voice of the girl from his memories – trembled.

“Hayato. Really, thank you for saving me that day.”

“Thank God...”

The feelings of his heart came naturally to his tongue as tears ran down his face.

“I finally was able to remember. And, not only are you alive and well, but we were able to meet once more—”

Gently tracing the scar with his fingers, he wrapped Emilia in a tight embrace.

“I'm glad that you're alive too. I'm so happy that you've remembered me—”

Emilia hugged him back as she spoke.

"I've always believed that if you were alive, you'd be led to the Hundred and so we'd meet again."

"Led to the Hundred, you mean—"

"You know the details behind the First Attack, right?"

"That whole 'giant meteorites dropped onto the South Pole' thing, right? It's said that the Savage came to this Earth on those things..."

"Simply put, yes. It was only after that event that people like us, people who could wield the Hundred, appeared."

What Emilia told him next was staggering.

A virus, which had traveled the vast reaches of space via the Savage, had spread throughout the world upon their arrival.

The Hundred reacted and changed form in response to those who harbored the virus.

"The two of us are special even among that select group, however. I suffered an injury during the Savage's attack on Gutenberg. At that time, you sucked the Savage's poison out directly, right? Something happened to the two of us then – the virus entered my body directly, as it did yours, via the medium of my tainted blood."

"And that's why we can operate the Hundred?"

"It is, without a doubt, the reason your reaction reading is the highest in the world. It's not an airborne virus, but its mortality rate is still quite high; you and I were very fortunate to survive. Moreover, it's because of that that we hold such great power in our hands. People like us, namely those directly infected by the virus, are known as "Variants." In the entire world, there are only around ten such individuals. That's why I knew that you'd find me eventually."

In other words, if Kisaragi Hayato were to have survived the incident, then he was fated to come across the Hundred sooner or later.

That thought had kept Emilia alive as she waited for him.

“I’ve had Charl monitor every reaction aptitude test held across the world. That was how I found you. Charl was sure that you had cheated during the test the Warslan Company administered for you. However, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was you whom I’ve been looking for this entire time.”

“Could it be that you’ve come to this school—”

“Because you were here, yes. I had Charl pull the necessary strings. If it weren’t for her efforts, there’s simply no way I could have disguised myself as a man, you know?”

“...That’s— Wait. So why *are* you disguised as a man—?!”

It wasn’t something that ought to be necessary in the present. Furthermore, if she hadn’t disguised herself, then their reunion would have happened much earlier.

“It’s because of... well, you know... my family situation.”

Her tone carried a heavier meaning.

Thinking on the issue, Hayato remembered.

When they had been children, Emilia had had to sneak out of the house to play with him. She was from a strict, old-fashioned family, or so he’d heard.

“Don’t tell me your family doesn’t know you’re here?”

“Hahaha, you’ve always been perceptive, Hayato. It’s just as you’ve said. I snuck out of the house and made my way here.”

Given the circumstances, she’d had to arrange for a fake name and background, watching her every step so that she couldn’t be tracked.

“Ever since I was infected during the Second Attack, I’ve been kept on an even tighter leash than I was during our childhood. To be honest, my family doesn’t know that Charl’s taught me to use the Hundred.”

“Seriously, you...” Hayato replied, astounded.

She was utterly unlike the gentle, submissive girl he remembered, but he felt the current Emilia, so full of energy, wasn't bad either.

"Wasn't it hard to keep your disguise up all the time?"

"Certainly. It was worth it, though. It might have been just a coincidence, but it's only because of that that I could share a room with Hayato."

THUMP – his heart pounded in his ears.

Emilia giggled, positioning her forefinger before her lips.

"Everything that we've just talked about – Variants and so forth – must be kept secret, okay? A secret for just the two of us; even your sister can't know, alright?"

"Yeah, got it."

"...Wait, I said just the two of us, but now that I think about it... Charlotte already knows, doesn't she?"

"Ah, that's true, isn't it? Well, a secret between the three of us then."

Emilia laughed happily as she scratched her head.

"With that, we come to the main point. The hazy memories of your duel earlier is one of the traits of Variants."

"Traits of Variants? What do you mean...?"

"When your life's at risk, the virus activates and instinctive defense measures come into action. It's a state we call the "Raging Berserker", a condition wherein your strength continuously surges."

"Raging Berserker, huh..."

Now that he thought about it, that name certainly matched what he'd experienced.

"In exchange, you lose yourself, and run rampant. It's quite troublesome since it can reveal you to be a Variant. I, too, was in that state not too long ago, but nowadays, I'm somewhat able to control it. It's not a problem anymore."

“In other words, I could control it with practice?”

“You need to be able to control Energy first. You need to control both that and the sleeping power that lies within yourself. They’re quite similar. Give it your best, alright?”

“Y-Yeah...”

As he was about to nod in reply, an unexpected change came over his body.

W-What...?

His feet wobbled and his vision grew dim.

His condition must have been worse than he’d realized.

Hayato turned to Emilia and collapsed into her chest.

“Wait, Hayato, you can’t suddenly...! I need to prepare myself first...”

Emilia’s face was dyed a deep red. However, she quickly realized that he was neither flirting nor asserting his friendship.

“Could it... Hayato— Your body’s still...”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I can stand.”

“Oh. Then wait just a sec.”

“Huh...”

Emilia took Hayato’s face into her hands...

“What’re you doing...?”

“It’s fine. Just be quiet for a moment; it can only be done like this.”

As she spoke, she leaned in.

And—

“Wha...”

“Nnnn... Fuuuu...”

—Covered Hayato’s lips with her own.

“Nn, fuu... chuu, chuu, nmuu... chuu...”

Their kiss continued.

One second... five... ten...

“Nn, fuu...”

As their lips separated, Emilia’s saliva suddenly found its way down his throat.

“Why would you suddenly...”

Blushing furiously, Hayato touched his lips.

“You being tired is the direct result of the infection. Once activated, the virus consumes a vast quantity of Energy which results in the unusual phenomenon you experienced.”

“Even if that’s true, what does a kiss have to do with any of that?”

“Well, that’s...”

“...Eh?”

“Once a Variant’s ability has activated, Energy consumption increases tremendously causing a terrible strain on the body. One of the best approaches for countering this side-effect is... to be administered virus that hasn’t yet activated.”

“That’s... impossible...”

“Yes. I’ve delivered the virus contained within my body to you through my saliva. Charlotte’s developed a medicine which would serve a similar purpose, but this is simply the most effective method.”

He was suddenly reminded of the moment when he’d regained consciousness.

“Could you perhaps have k-kissed me while I slept as well?”

“Huh...? Were you awake then?”

“I can vaguely recall. Anyway, one way or another, the memory’s there...”

“Um, it was an emergency, so... I kissed you of my own accord... Sorry...”

“Because it was an emergency? You totally decided to do it on your own just now too...”

“Ahaha, now that you mention it, that’s kinda true...”

“Are you really fine with that? Even if you have a deeper reason for it, to do something like kissing with me...”

“I-I don’t particularly mind, alright? If it was someone else, then maybe, but if it’s Hayato...”

“Eh...?”

“You didn’t like it?”

“That’s not it...”

The hospital room grew dead silent.

There was a decided tension in the air.

“So uh, Hayato? Is your body better now? Can you stand on your own?”

“Looks like it, I guess.”

“Then let’s head back, okay?”

Hayato changed into his uniform and left alongside *Emil*.

Normally, it’d be but a ten-minute walk from the hospital to the dorm. This time, however, they hadn’t even reached the halfway point eight minutes in.

“Even though you said you were fine, you seem to be in quite some pain...” Emil commented, given the strange way Hayato was walking.

“I’d prefer to focus on walking as opposed to thinking, if that’s fine with you...?”

“...Should we go back to the hospital?”

“No. I’ve gone through great troubles to get here, so I’ll see it through...”

Ten minutes later, they arrived at the dorm without incident.

However...

“—Ugh.”

As they reached their room, Hayato lost his balance. Panicking, Emil caught his body.

“...Are you alright?”

“I guess I’m still a bit weak...”

He was dizzy, and his vision hazy.

“It would probably have been better for you to just rest back at the hospital instead of attempting the impossible, huh? Sorry that I asked you to come back to the dorm...”

“Even if you say that now, it can’t be helped. We’re already back, right?”

Borrowing Emil’s shoulder, Hayato made his way to his bed.

“Alright then, rest well. When you wake up next, your body will be back to its normal state.”

“...I see...”

Lying down, his consciousness began to fade.

By the time Emil’s gentle words reached his ears, he’d already fallen into the deep abyss of sleep.

※※※

Late that night, Claire Harvey, the student council president, was burning the midnight oil in the student council room of the Bugeika school building.

Before her were matters which had to be resolved before the day was over, as well as a stack of official paperwork to be signed. The contents of the

papers she held in her hands never entered her consciousness. She simply could not stop thinking about Kisaragi Hayato.

Kisaragi Hayato, what on Earth are you...

He'd broken every record for the aptitude test and reaction reading. That notwithstanding, nothing particularly stood out about the readings of his other pre-enrollment tests.

Furthermore, he was completely inexperienced at handling the Hundred.

Claire had thus determined to assess his potential as a Slayer.

It had been for that very reason that she had intentionally instigated the incident with Emil Crossford and the latecomers. Unable to refuse, Kisaragi Hayato had been maneuvered into a situation where he could not refuse a duel that would exert him to his very utmost.

With regards to the outcome, her pride as the undefeated Queen with a two-year reign had been demolished.

And, that thing he used after activating his Full-Body Armament – that was undoubtedly an N-Barrier...

There existed a type of Savage that was capable of utilizing the N-Barrier, but even for them, it was a matter of genetic predisposition – there simply did not exist an Energy manipulation technique which allowed one to deploy such a barrier. If a Slayer were to wield such a power, it was only because their Hundred had been instilled with such a function.

However, his data contained no information on his ability to use the Full-Body Armament, let alone the N-Barrier. Neither had Charlotte Dymandias made any mention of his Hundred having such a function.

“Claire-sama. Claire-sama...”

A voice called her from her reverie.

Erika had approached her without her realizing.

“...How long have you been there?”

“Since a moment ago. I called you once already, but you didn’t respond, so I called once more.”

“I apologize. I was lost in thought,” Claire replied, turning her gaze to Erika’s hands.

She was holding a teapot and a cup.

“Black tea, is it? Thank you.”

“You fought that duel earlier today. I feared you might be tired.”

Erika placed the tea cup on Claire’s desk before continuing.

“Would you like anything to go with your tea?”

“Kisaragi Hayato...”

Erika’s expression clouded in an instant.

“...Please don’t worry about it too much. If it had been an ordinary duel, then it would unmistakably have been Claire-sama’s victory.”

“I’m not worrying about that.”

“T-Then is it because he touched your b-breasts...?”

“Wha...?!”

Claire reddened.

“I-It’s not like that at all...”

She lifted her tea cup as if to demonstrate her composure, though she achieved the opposite effect as her hands were trembling.

The memory of his touch crossed her mind.

Honestly, because of Erika, I’m remembering more than I want to now...

It went without saying that her chest had never once been touched by a member of the opposite sex. For something like that to happen – in front of the public even! It was a complete disgrace—

I wonder what this is I’m feeling...

ba-dump – the reason for the pounding of her heart.

What she was feeling.

Claire didn't understand any of it.

“More importantly, Erika, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to consult you about a matter regarding Kisaragi Hayato——”

Her next words described her proposal for manipulating his fate even more.

Chapter 4: Date/Student Council/Innocence

“N, nnn...”

Responding to the light shining through a gap between the curtains, Kisaragi Hayato awoke.

...Hmm? What's this...?

Feeling a strange warmth on his body, he sat up in surprise. Emilia was fast asleep in his bed.

This discovery called to remembrance the events of the day before. After returning from the hospital, he'd passed out and Emilia had helped him, unconscious, to his bed.

I'm guessing she watched over me after that?

Next, he recalled the confession from yesterday evening.

The person before him was – per his self-introduction – his classmate, Emil Crossford.

However, this person's true identity was none other than the girl he'd seen in his dreams of his childhood – his first love, whom he'd met in Gutenberg ten long years ago – Emilia Hammett.

“Emilia...”

Whispering her name, he caressed her head as he had long ago.

This brought to mind joyful memories of the time he'd once spent with her.

What a strange feeling...

He laughed to hide his embarrassment.

Sharing the same bed as they were made him distinctly aware of her fragrant, womanly scent. It inspired some strange feelings in him.

I might do something I'll regret if I don't end this situation...

Cautioning himself, he tried to slowly rise. Rubbing her seemingly still sleepy eyes, Emilia raised her body before him.

“Nn, morning... Hayato...”

“Oi, what’s with that getup—?!”

Hayato blushed a deep red.

Emilia was, after all, wearing only a thin, white shirt. The two bulges on her chest only made things worse; he well understood the danger that they posed. Furthermore, her lower half was covered by only a pair of thin white shorts.

“Well, last night, I helped Hayato to bed, nursed you, and I guess I fell asleep like that... Wait, UWAA—!”

She finally realized what she looked like. Emilia grabbed the bed covers in a fluster and covered herself.

“No need to explain, just change into something fast!”

“With you here? Hayato... ecchi...”

“Then I’ll leave!”

“Wait!”

As he tried to jump off the bed in a panic, something warm introduced itself to his back. Emilia had snaked her arms around his back and gripped him in a tight embrace

“W-What do you think you’re you doing?”

“It’s fine if you don’t leave; I can change if you’ll just turn your back...”

“No, I meant why are you suddenly...”

“Sorry. But let me stay like this a bit longer.”

“Why would you...”

“Because, well, these peaceful moments with Hayato make me happy... I can be together with you...”

Two soft objects pressed up against his back. This was far too stimulating for this early in the morning.

“Isn’t it about time you let go?”

“Ah, yep... sorry.”

“I’m heading outside then.”

“I already told you that that won’t be necessary. Just turn around,” she called out as Hayato began to leave the room.

“I can still hear you changing. I can’t help it if I feel uneasy about that.”

“Ahaha, Hayato, you’re so cute.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Emilia’s giggling made him pout.

“Anyway, hurry up and change. Breakfast time’s already started.”

“...I know.”

The sound of rustling clothes and clothes hitting the floor caused his heart to pound in his ears.

Behind him, a girl – Emilia – was only changing, but his face turned feverish nonetheless.

“You can turn around now.”

By the time she called out, Hayato, too, had finished changing.

He turned around to find Emilia Hammett gone and Emil Crossford in her place.

Although she wore a lightweight outfit of a jersey and trousers over her shirt, her hair was bound together at the back in her usual ponytail style. It was only natural that one wouldn’t notice the bulges on her chest.

“I’m going to go ahead and wash my face.”

“You know—”

“Hmm?”

Responding to the voice calling out from behind her as she made her way to the bathroom, Emil paused and turned.

“Thanks for last night. I was totally out of it.”

“Carrying you to your bed was no trouble at all. Removing your clothes was a bit troubling though...”

“Removing my— oh...”

Hayato remembered that he’d been in his uniform when he’d collapsed. However, when rising, he’d only had his uniform shirt and trousers on.

“I was pretty concerned. You also sweat a lot, so I wiped your body down with a towel after I bathed.”

“You wiped me down... You didn’t touch me in any weird places...?”

“Like where?”

“That’s, err...”

“...?”

“If you didn’t, then it’s fine.”

Hayato laughed.

Chuckling, Emil entered the bathroom.

Afterward, they traded places and Hayato washed his face, finalizing their preparations to leave.

“So Hayato, how does your body feel now?”

“A lot better than it did yesterday; I seem to be as healthy as always.”

“But your stomach’s empty, right?”

“Well, yeah. Very much so.”

“I knew it.”

Emil grinned broadly.

“When people consume a lot of Energy, they get really hungry.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep, especially after you use the power of a Variant. It tends to leave you that way, you know?”

With that, Hayato and Emil promptly left for the lobby where breakfast was being prepared.

“Mornin’. Yesterday was pretty incredible, huh? You feelin’ better already?”

In the lobby were three freshmen. One of them, Fritz, approached them with a greeting.

His dress – a shirt and trousers – was very casual. The other freshmen were dressed as he was, and they were all engaged in busily filling their mouths with sandwiches.

“Well then, let’s eat.”

On a wide table, a variety of sandwiches with egg, lettuce, and tomatoes – some with ham, some with roasted chicken – were laid out.

The selection of beverages – including orange juice, vegetable juice, milk, ice coffee, and mineral water – was enough to confuse.

On a side note, the dorm’s food was all prepared by the school cafeteria and transported to its destination each morning and evening.

In this way, both the taste was guaranteed and nutrition tightly managed.

All of this info had been shared with them by Fritz, at their request.

Afterward, Hayato and Emil sat down for breakfast with Fritz and the others.

Hayato was then informed that the two freshmen from earlier would be continuing their stay in Little Garden after all. Claire had repealed the order for their expulsion.

At that, Hayato heaved a sigh of relief.

“So, what are you two going to do today?”

“That depends on Hayato’s condition, I’d say...”

Emil answered Fritz’s question, meeting the gaze of the face assessing Hayato’s condition.

“I’ve said this already, but I feel perfectly fine; I’m not hurt anywhere.”

Emil’s face lightened up with enthusiasm at his reply.

“If that’s the case, then there’s something I’d like to do with Hayato today.”

“...Which is?”

“A date!”

“A date? With...!”

Hayato spat out his orange juice in shock.

“Ahaha. This warship’s business district——I thought I’d like to visit Central.”

Emil told the flustered Hayato with an innocent expression.

Yesterday’s duel had robbed them of the chance to look around, and lessons began on the morrow. There wouldn’t be another opportunity to do so until the end of the following week, so she wanted to visit the business district before the day was out.

“So, why don’t we go together?”

If she hadn’t characterized it as a date to begin with, then he would’ve agreed from the start. He’d been wanting to see Central as well, after all.

“If that’s the case, then let’s do it, shall we?”

“Yay!”

Upon hearing Hayato’s reply, the delighted Emil gave a cheer.

“In that case, I’ll head back to our room first, okay?”

After finishing breakfast, Emil stood up from her seat and went to their room. Subsequently, Hayato stood up from his chair, and then Fritz asked something of him as well.

“You headed for the bath?”

Hayato nodded.

As he didn’t get into the bath yesterday evening, he wanted to at least take a shower after this, Hayato had told Fritz and Emil that during their meal.

He had sweated a lot while he was asleep and, as Emilia had been close to him all the while they were sleeping, he was deeply dyed in her scent. Worrying about that, he couldn’t help the racing of his heart. He couldn’t keep going on without taking a bath.

“Which reminds me, what are your plans for the day, Fritz? If you’d like, why not join us in Central?”

Although he had already agreed to visit Central together with Emilia some time ago, it was his first time in ten years going on a date with a woman that wasn’t his sister...

Even if the person from that time had also been Emilia, things had changed too much; he didn’t know how he should behave.

With that in mind, he figured that it’d probably be better for Fritz and Ridia to accompany them.

The reply, however, dashed his hopes.

“Sorry, but I already have an appointment to visit the Colosseum with Ridia today. The seniors from the Bugeika will be holding a mock battle there, and she wanted to watch.”

That was a very Ridia-ish excuse, he thought. It would have been nice if he hadn’t had other plans, but given the circumstances, he couldn’t ask Fritz the impossible.

“Come to think of it, are you and Ridia going out?”

“The heck are you asking all of a sudden?”

Hayato accidentally blurted out something he'd been wondering for some time now. Fritz's face clouded over at his question.

“Don't tell me you've fallen for her or something? You'd better give up on that; that girl's just a brat – in mind, body, and experience.”

“It's nothing like that. I was just curious about your relationship; you're always together, after all. Why is that?”

To be honest, he was hoping for a reference for his relationship with Emilia.

He couldn't say that, though, so he dodged the question. Eyeing Hayato with suspicion, Fritz responded.

“I already introduced her as my childhood friend, right? Don't confuse us for lovers, okay? We've just always been together since way-back-when, so our relationship just naturally became like this.”

“So, even when you're near Ridia, your heart doesn't throb?”

“Of course not! No way do I have those kinds of feeling for Ridia... Ohh, I see now. You fell for the student council president! She's a beauty, she is, and her breasts are *massive*.”

“That's not it!”

“It's fine. There's no need to be shy.”

“I said that's not it!”

Hayato shouted again to get his point across.

“What, I thought that during that fight you seemed to get cold feet or something, but I figured... If you had fought with your fists, a wonderful friendship would've probably bloomed between you two. Didn't you fall in love because of that?”

Laughing heartily, Fritz continued.

“It must’ve been great, rubbing the Prez’s breasts. They were huge, right?”

They were huge indeed. And very soft. But that wasn’t what he should be thinking about right now. He wasn’t in a situation to remember that feeling.

“Well, whoever it is, good luck, alright? They say love makes people strong, after all.”

Fritz rose and returned to his room.

He had the feeling there’d been a grave misunderstanding, but the more he protested, the worse the misunderstanding became. He eventually gave up on trying.

Since she was always by my side, I’d never really thought anything of it, huh—

As he soaked in the public bath, Hayato recalled the earlier exchange with Fritz.

That continued even after he’d finished his bath and returned to his room.

He remembered the feeling of Emilia’s lips from the evening before.

That was just a Hundred thing and not that kind of thing, I guess... he convinced himself.

But if the girl who was my first love does that kind of—Aaah, enough!

He shook his head to dislodge the thoughts running through his mind. If this continued on, his body would soon hit its limits, leaving him at a loss for what to do.

...Haa...

As I thought, there’s nothing I can do but get used to it, huh?

※※※

A short time after, Hayato and Emil left their dorm and made their way toward the warship’s prime shopping district – Central.

“It’s annoying that we have to wear the uniform even on holidays...”

The weather was warm: sunny, without a cloud in the sky. That, combined with the long-sleeved uniform, made them sweat.

“It can’t be helped; on this battleship, Slayers and Bugeika students are a somewhat special existence. It’s to distinguish them, or so Fritz said.”

“If I remember correctly, soldiers in Liberia also receive special treatment. You get freebies for entering a shop in uniform, I hear...”

“That’s... ehm, not particularly the reason, though.”

After leaving the dorm, they’d been walking side-by-side, close enough for their uniforms to brush against one another.

When they got too close, however, his heart would pound, and so he did his best to keep his distance.

“Muu, stupid Hayato,” Emil pouted, closing the distance again.

Even if she looked like a boy at the moment, he couldn’t forget that she was a girl after all; it was a difficult situation.

That was why he’d tried to distance himself, but Emil had noticed and thwarted his efforts.

It didn’t look possible to separate anymore.

It makes me happy walking side-by-side like this, but, as expected, it was rather stimulating...

He still had a ways to go to get used to this.

“Now that I think of it, the business district’s probably called Central because it’s in the middle of Little Garden...”

Hayato spoke to distract himself. That, and not silence, would help his nervousness.

“We can probably tell if we take a look at the PDA’s map, but I don’t think it is. It seems like it’s called Central in the sense of being the ‘heart’ of the city.”

“You sure know your stuff, don’t you?”

“I consulted a map of Little Garden on my PDA while you were bathing.”

Emil proceeded to share what she’d learned, describing the three main regions of Little Garden.

The first of the three – the ‘Terminal Area’ – was the outer region wherein the airport, dock, etc. were located. Both airplanes and small ships reached the warship through this area.

Next was the half of the Dome section designated as the ‘Military Area’, located at the ship’s forward bow. This area housed the academy, military, training facility, colosseum, practice grounds, and research lab. The dorm where Hayato and the others resided was also here.

The last area was where they were headed now, the ‘Family Area’. This warship’s business district – Central – was located there, as were many commerce and entertainment oriented businesses. Additionally, it, as its name suggested, housed the residential area that was home to Little Garden’s staff, employees of the Business district, and their families.

Perhaps due to transitioning between the Military and Family Areas, the number of refined houses surrounding them began to increase.

The view unveiling itself to their eyes made it harder than ever to believe that they were still on board a ship.

“Aaah, I can’t wait; I’m looking forward to it so much!”

“Even if you say you’re looking forward to it, there’s no way it compares to Gutenberg, where you lived before, right? All the rebuilding after the Second Attack should be long done.”

Before leaving their dorm, the two had decided that when she was dressed like a man, they’d refer to her as Emil and not Emilia. There was no way of knowing when someone might be listening, and so this made things easier.

“Umm, that’s true, but I didn’t often go outside in Gutenberg, you know? After the attack, we relocated to a more rural area...”

That reminds me, Emilia said the same thing when we were young.

She was always wearing some expensive-looking dresses. It's probably because of the 'relocation', but she's certainly grown up into a fine ojousama.

I guess that caused her to grow up pretty ignorant as to the ways of the world. That's pretty amazing in its own way, really.

“That’s me, so it’s your turn now. How is Yamato’s capital?”

“Yamato? The imperial capital never suffered a Savage attack, so it’s prospered, I guess. After the attack on Gutenburg, we went home to the Yamato countryside, where we’ve lived ever since, so the only image of the imperial capital that I have is the one from TV.”

Although he’d visited the imperial capital briefly before coming to Little Garden, he had only had time to visit the Warslan company’s Yamato branch before boarding the transport nearly immediately after.

There had been no time for sightseeing, so he didn’t know a thing. Furthermore, the weather had been bad, so even viewing the townscape had been just about impossible.

“That makes us pretty much the same then, right?”

Emil smiled brightly.

※※※

After a ten-minute walk, starting from their dorm, they finally arrived at their destination: Central.

It was a bit before 10 o’clock, but the town was already surprisingly crowded.

“There seem to be quite a few Slayers too, huh...”

Upon entering Central there were quite a few people who passed by them that were wearing military uniforms or were wearing the same school uniform as them. Comparatively speaking, there were more students, but

the Slayer population was nine-tenths the size of the student population, so it was only natural.

“There are many freshmen like us too, right?”

Certainly, as Emil had said, he could see the figures of many freshmen with a single badge attached to their collars, their bodies clad in brand-new uniforms. Given their restless gazes and nonchalant walk, it was immediately obvious – they were the same as Hayato and company.

“So what do you want to do first?”

“First, let’s do a round of Central itself. It’s not that big, so we can think about what we want to do as we walk around.”

Alongside Emil, Hayato circled Central once as if it were a track, before ending up walking down Main Street.

Various shops lined the street. It wouldn’t be too far fetched to say that some parts of it were the same you’d see in a normal town’s shopping district, although one could say that it was perhaps somewhat more attractive than a normal town’s. Clothing and apparel shops, taverns and bars, and even toy shops could all be seen.

“We’re just looking around, but it’s fun. It’s really been a while. Since we walked the streets of Gutenberg together, that is.”

Hayato felt similarly.

It really was fun.

But there was just one thing on his mind.

“Aren’t we drawing a lot of attention somehow?” Hayato whispered into Emil’s ear.

Ever since entering Central, he had felt the weight of countless gazes upon them.

“It’s only to be expected, you know?” Emil answered unconcernedly.

“To be expected...? What do you mean?”

“Well, you were already an object of interest from the start, and the way you beat the president yesterday only made that more so, so of course you draw attention. What you did yesterday is the talk of the town. I’m pretty sure tomorrow people will be talking about our going shopping together here in Central.”

Simply put, it wasn’t just a few eyes that were on him, but many, and it wasn’t likely to be a temporary situation, either.

“There’ll be a fuss about everything you do here, whether it be shopping, eating, or anything else...”

It looked like visiting Central in the future could be quite irritating.

“It’ll be okay. After a while, people will get used to it, and you won’t have to worry about it anymore. Alternatively, we could try to start some even stranger rumors.”

“Hey, stop that! That kind of rumor is bad news!”

Emil had twined her arm around Hayato, as lovers do. Even if he couldn’t feel her breasts against him, her body was still extremely soft. When the distance between them shrank like this, it was simultaneously heaven and hell. Her feminine fragrance threw him off his stride even more.

“Think about your situation and control yourself a bit...”

Flustered, Hayato pushed Emil away.

“Mou, Hayato’s such a shy-guy...”

“That’s not the problem here, geez...”

Hayato and Emil were walking side-by-side once more.

Extending beyond the attention they were already receiving, he began to hear mutters of “Hayato-kun and Emil-kun... I wonder who’s the top and who’s the bottom?”

Were we seen?

I would've been fine if there weren't any strange rumors spreading, though...

At that thought, his shoulders slumped.

"We've just about circled the place now, so what next? Wanna grab something to eat, or would you rather go shopping?"

"There's a place I'd like to visit first, if you wouldn't mind going with me? It's somewhere close by, okay?"

"...And that place is?"

"In Westside – opposite the Terminal District, at the westernmost end of Central – is a park. It's Little Garden's most popular dating spot. You can see the ocean from there and the sun sinking into the horizon's supposedly very pretty. It's totally worth a visit from what I've heard."

"Isn't it still too early for that?"

The sun was still high in the sky.

"That's true, but even at midday, we can still enjoy the pretty scenery, so let's go!"

"If that's the case, then maybe we should."

She'd kept him company during his crash course training and even gone so far as to nurse him back to health yesterday. So today, he intended to return the favor and keep Emil company.

When they had gone West long enough, the trees in their surroundings increased.

"We'll soon be there; this greenery's part of Westside and beyond this plaza should be a viewing platform."

As described, once they'd left the red-brick plaza behind, the ocean filled their vision for as far as the eye could see.

Seagulls swam through the blue sky, almost as if piercing through it.

woosh *woosh*, the sound of waves and the scent of salt water grew ever stronger.

The ocean's really beautiful...

Walking along the railing which had been installed on the edge of the battleship, Hayato looked at the ocean.

Brilliant rays of sunlight glistened as they were reflected off a pure emerald sea without a hint of murkiness.

A scene not to be found in all of Yamato – it left him speechless.

It must be even more amazing in the evening...

Just as he'd been told, it was a popular dating spot flooded with couples. Pairs of people passed time in silence, their gazes fixed on the setting sun.

Eventually, their hands finding one another——

Just kidding, he might indeed have desired that kind of thing but there was no way that he could do that with Emil, standing beside him and watching the ocean with him.

She wasn't Emilia Hammett right now, after all, but Emil Crossford—— Someone who, no matter how you looked at him, was a boy.

But, just a bit, I wonder how it'd feel...

There wasn't anyone near them right now, so it'd be fine if just for a moment. With that thought, he extended his hand to grasp Emil's.

But he just couldn't do it...

With just a hair's breadth between them, his hand failed to bridge the gap.

And, just as he had finally steeled his resolve and was about to reach out...

Unexpectedly, their hands touched.

Emil looked at Hayato and smiled, tightening her grip on his hand.

"Hey, you..."

“There’s no one around right now, so just this much should be fine, right? Plus, you were trying to do the same thing just now...”

“That’s... true...”

“So just for a bit.”

“Y-Yeah...”

For a while, they held hands.

“Hey, Emil...”

“Wouldn’t *Emilia* be okay for now?”

“Eeehm, then, Emilia...”

“What is it?”

“There’s something I’d been meaning to ask once we were alone...”

He spoke aloud what had been on his mind since morning.

There was no one around and so he didn’t have to worry about others listening in.

It was the perfect opportunity.

“Eh, that’s, what might it be... somehow, my heart’s kinda pounding...”

“Um, well, didn’t you say yesterday that you came to Little Garden to meet me? So, now that you’ve met me, I was wondering what your plans were.”

“Aaah, so it’s that. That’s the kind of talk you wanted to have, huh...”

Losing her strength, Emilia’s head drooped.

“That kind of talk?” What kind of talk did you think it was?”

“J-Just forget it. As for what I plan to do, well, you’re going to be here from now on, right? In that case, so will I. That’s all there is to it.”

Emil continued with a smile.

“I ran away, after all. I can’t go back yet; first, I’ve got to repay the favor to Charl, who was forced into enrolling me here.”

“So you’ll become a Slayer and fight the Savage, huh?”

She noticed that Hayato’s expression had darkened.

“Do you have something against me becoming a Slayer?” she asked with a meek expression.

“No, it just feels wrong to ask you to put yourself in danger for my sake without regard for what you’ll have to go through.”

“That’s not true. Plus, we’re in the same boat here – because of me, Hayato’s come to Little Garden to become a Slayer.”

“That might be true, but...”

“I get the feeling that you want to take revenge on the Savage for tearing us apart ten years ago. Hayato, if you become a top-tier Slayer, kill my portion of the Savage for me, and are willing to support me with your salary, then I wouldn’t mind thinking about retiring.”

“The heck is that...”

“Ah, well... what I said just now, just forget it, haha...”

A deceptive laugh.

“In any event, we’ve only just arrived here. We can think about what to do from now on little by little, alright?”

“Though I’ve unexpectedly had to duel the Pres right off the bat, huh...”

“Sorry about that. But you might also say that it’s thanks to that that we’ve grown used to our current situation, right?”

Suddenly, the PDA’s default ringtone interrupted the two.

“...Is that yours?”

“Looks like it.”

Hayato pulled his hand away from Emil, and sticking it in his pocket, retrieved his PDA.

He checked the display.

“It’s from Karen...”

“Your sister? You should answer it.”

“R-Right...”

He had a *very* ominous feeling, but as urged by Emilia, Hayato timidly pressed the call button.

[Nii-san, why haven’t you told me about yesterday’s duel?]

“Uh...”

It was a preemptive attack.

“That, well, it was decided on out of the blue and I thought it’d be bad if I worried you...” Hayato answered in a fluster.

[Although it was some time ago, I heard from Miharu about yesterday’s duel and the fact that Nii-san was brought into the hospital; it really shocked me, you know? Although I wanted to see your injuries, is your body okay?]

“It’s nothing to worry about. I feel just fine. So everything’s fine, don’t worry.”

[If I worry, it’s because Nii-san does nothing but unreasonable things...”

“If you put it like that, I can’t really argue...”

[But what you did is just so like you, I think. Duelling for someone’s sake— —]

“Is that so?”

[That’s the kind of person Nii-san is. But before you do anything dangerous again, make sure you let Karen know properly. Promise me. If you don’t, I’ll curse you for real.]

“Right, got it.”

[So, Nii-san, what are you doing right now? I think I can hear birds chirping for some reason...]

“I’m in Westside, at the outskirts of Central right now.”

[Westside...? You're not with a girl right now, are you?]

Karen's tone had dropped. That happened when she was suspicious. Given her reaction, she probably knew that Westside was a dating spot.

"O-Of course not..."

[That's a little suspicious, isn't it? Nii-san, you had that duel yesterday and it looks like you're popular among the girls in the hospital too, so I'm a bit uneasy. You haven't been deceived by some strange girl, have you?]

"I'm fine, really!"

[According to yesterday's fortune telling, today, a girl and Onii-chan...]

"I'm telling you there's nothing like that!"

[That's the honest truth, right? If that's the case, then you have nothing to worry about if I confirm that in person, right?]

"Confirm...?"

[I have permission to go out today. So, I thought I'd come and have dinner with Nii-san after this. Originally, I was calling to inform you, but it seems like Nii-san's already at Central...]

"Going out? How do you plan to do that? You can't walk..."

[I've got a wheelchair, and I can take a bus from the hospital to Central so it's no problem.]

"...Are you serious?"

[Dead serious. From tomorrow on, Nii-san's classes will start and we won't be able to see each other as often.]

"If that's what you want, then I can come to the hospital..."

[Now that that's settled, once I arrive at Central, I'll contact you, okay? Please be alone by then.]

"No, wait, hey!" Hayato shouted.

However, there was no response.

The call had ended.

Is she really coming here?

...Given her tone, I get the feeling that she is.

Hayato sighed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Karen’s coming here...”

“Ah, so it’s that!”

“What’s with that reaction? You seem delighted.”

“I’ve been wanting to meet Karen-chan too. She’s your little sister, after all. I’ve got to properly greet her. We’ll be socializing for a long time from now on, so I want to be on good terms with her.”

“What are you thinking... Plus, she’s afraid of strangers, you know...”

“I’ll show you how skilled I am. Okay? It’s fine, right?”

“...Alright already.”

It can’t be helped, Hayato sighed once more.

“Yes!”

Emilia may have been delighted, but Hayato was filled with anxiety.

“Where are you meeting Karen-chan?”

“I believe she said she’d come by bus...”

“Then shouldn’t we go back to the town center and try to look for her at the bus stop?”

※※※

Hayato and Emil returned to Central’s town center and went looking for the bus stop.

It seemed that buses were constantly traveling around Little Garden. At their current location, the bus appeared once every 15 minutes or so.

A bus arrived immediately after the pair reached the bus stop, but as might be expected, Karen was not on it. 15 minutes passed before the next bus came.

After several passengers disembarked, a wheelchair alighted next.

Riding in this wheelchair was none other than Karen.

Unlike the wheelchair she'd used back in Yamato, this one was far more elaborate. She had no need to move her wheels herself; instead, via a joystick located on the armrest, she was able to direct the movement of her wheelchair.

Deftly manipulating her wheelchair controls, she made her way to Hayato's side.

"Oh, you're here to greet me, right?"

The moment she caught sight of her brother, she raised her voice happily.

"To travel this far alone... Are you feeling okay?"

"My health's been much improved ever since coming here. Miharu also kept me company until the bus came."

"Is that so..."

If she was feeling better, then he was happy to hear it.

"Well then, Nii-san, th—"

At long last, Karen became aware of the presence of Emil, standing behind Hayato. Her face took on a severe expression.

"Nii-san, you weren't alone...?"

"...Uh, I didn't mention it?"

"I certainly don't remember hearing it," Karen answered plainly.

Come to think of it, I did say I wasn't with a girl, but I guess I never mentioned I was with my roommate...

“...So? Who is that?”

She directed a stern, pointed gaze in Emil's direction. Her tone was much harsher than it had been during her call earlier.

Emil took the opportunity to step in, asking gently, “Um, would it be okay if I introduced myself?”

“.....”

Karen didn't reply.

Ohhh man, I guess there's no helping it...

With his eyes, Hayato signaled to Emil that she should continue with her introduction. Emil turned to Karen with a smile.

“I'm Hayato's roommate in the dorms, Emil Crossfield. Nice to meet you, Karen-chan.”

“.....”

However, Karen didn't say anything. Instead, she continued to watch Emil with a look of puzzlement.

“...You're a... man, aren't you?”

Just as he thought to himself, *Finally, she speaks, those* were the words that left her mouth.

He panicked.

“People often tell me I have cute, feminine features, but I'm definitely male, unfortunately.”

Emil followed up her response with a natural-sounding laugh born of countless experiences just like this one.

Karen, however, was not to be done in so easily.

“Do you perhaps... like men...?”

“Oi, Karen! What do you think you’re saying—?! Apologize to Emil!”

Unable to contain himself, Hayato forced his way between them and shouted without thinking.

“But he accompanied Nii-san to Westwide; there’s just the two of you, right? That’s why I think he might be that kind of person...”

“You’re reading too much into it.”

Hayato sighed in exasperation.

“Nii-san also has the potential for such things...”

“Nope, no such thing.”

“If that’s really the truth, then fine, but... even then, it must be problematic for you. If you’d simply keep your distance from his person, then messy situations like this wouldn’t keep happening...”

“What do you mean by ‘messy situations’?”

“Things like yesterday’s duel or your popularity with the girls in the hospital that came because of it. I’m curious what you plan to do, surrounded by girls like this.”

“There’s nothing to worry about there. I’ll drive away any scum which dares to gather around Hayato, so you can rest easy, Karen-chan.”

“...And why on Earth would you care?” Karen retorted with a sharp glare.

“Um, well, if it’s something my roommate’s little sister wants, then I can’t just ignore it, right?” Emil said deceptively.

Karen wasn’t buying it.

What do I do about this...

“So uh, we’ve been talking for a while, and I’m getting pretty hungry here, so why don’t we get something to eat?”

“In that case, there’s somewhere I’d like to go.”

“...Somewhere you’d like to go?”

“Could you go shopping with me for a bit first? The place I have in mind is outside of Central.”

“That’s fine by me, but where is it you want to go? Somewhere that specializes in sweets?”

“Nope.”

Karen was especially fond of sweet things, so that had been his guess, but it seemed he was wrong.

“The place Karen wants to go to is the school cafeteria.”

※※※

The buildings for Little Garden’s elementary school, middle school, and high school could all be found within close proximity of the Bugeika building.

These were connected to the Bugeika building by a series of roofed walkways, at the center of which lay a courtyard.

The cafeteria thus served as a locale where all Little Garden students could freely intermingle.

The food was cheap and the servings plentiful.

A large number of people had gathered in the cafeteria today as well, even though it was a holiday.

“I never would’ve guessed that the place you wanted to visit would be the school cafeteria. Are you really sure about this?”

“I am. Nii-san hasn’t been here yet either. I also wanted to see what kind of place Nii-san will be attending from tomorrow on as well as to see a school for myself.”

“And how is it? Your impressions of having seen a school?”

“Even if it’s just the cafeteria, I’m glad that I could go inside the school building like this. Next time, I want to properly come on my own two feet and experience school life that way.”

“If you hurry up, it’ll be possible, right?”

“.....Yeah,” Karen replied with a nod, earning her a charming smile from Emil.

“Now then, shall we order something?”

As prompted by Emil, Hayato and Karen turned their gazes to the menu.

As if to match the diversity of people living in Little Garden, cuisines of various countries had been prepared by the cafeteria. Given the sheer selection available, it was hard to know where to start.

“Hmmm, I guess I’ll go with a pasta?”

Emil decided on a meal set that included pasta, bread, and a salad.

“That looks pretty good, wonder if I should get that too... What’re you getting, Karen?”

“Karen wants... that.”

Karen was pointing at a meal set of hamburger steak and fried prawns.

“Isn’t that a kids’ meal?”

“...Whatever. I want it.”

Buu, Karen pouted.

“I get it, I get it. Let’s find somewhere to sit then, shall we?”

Hayato shifted his gaze to a table with a parasol, just outside the cafeteria.

They stood out immensely; Karen, because of her wheelchair, and he, because of his duel the day before. He wanted to eat somewhere where they’d pass as unnoticed as possible.

“Wait here for me, Karen. I’ll get your order for you too.”

“.....Yeah.”

Hayato, having secured a table, left Karen to go place their orders with Emil.

The pasta sets came in three variations, of which Hayato chose the penne arrabiata and Emil, the macaroni and cheese.

Incidentally, they'd used their PDAs to pay for their meals electronically. Little Garden did not participate in cash exchange. The allowance for their meals had been given them in January, at the time of their entrance into the school.

Naturally, Hayato paid for his sister's meal as well as his own.

Hayato and Emil took their meals out of the cafeteria and settled down under the parasol of the table they'd chosen earlier. The three began their meal.

"It's great that I was able to become friends with Karen-chan today."

".....Be friends?"

As their meal approached its conclusion, Emil suddenly said these words. Hayato froze and his eyebrows rose.

Until this point, Karen had basically ignored any and all attempts on Emil's part to draw her into conversation.

"Haven't we shared food?"

"That's true, but..."

Karen had accepted the pasta Emil had offered her earlier.

"That was only 'cuz I wanted to try your food too. It looked pretty tasty."

"But when I asked you if you liked it, you answered. Isn't that right, Karen-chan?"

".....Uh....."

Emil's question left her at a loss, so Karen hung her head in shame.

"I guess there's still a ways to go, but I was able to speak with you at least once; that's progress."

Emil was extremely optimistic.

That Karen had been willing to accept food from her was a big step in the right direction. Karen had always been reluctant to take anything from people she had just met, a habit that dated back to their time in the orphanage.

Karen's slowly becoming an adult too, it seems...

She's opened her heart to Miharu – the nurse in charge of her care – too. She's already becoming an adult without me noticing. That makes me happy.

Immediately after Hayato had this thought...

“Ara, what a coincidence.”

An unexpected voice.

Surprised, Hayato turned his gaze in the direction of the voice.

There stood the Queen – Claire Harvey.

Nor was Claire alone. She was accompanied by the two vice presidents – Erika Candle and Ridi Steinberg – as well as a boy with cute features whom appeared slightly younger than Hayato and the others.

“Are you here to eat as well, or are you here to start something again?”

Just as she had the day before, Emil flared up in response, standing in stark contrast to the president, was unbothered by her hostility.

“...Nii-san, who are these people?”

Though clearly displeased——

The gaze Karen directed their way was nonetheless fearful.

“They’re members of Little Garden’s student council. The one in red is the president, while the two in blue are her vice presidents.”

“President... In other words, this drill is the one causing problems for Nii-san...”

Her sharp gaze targeted Claire.

“...Drill... you say?”

twitch Claire’s cheek twitched at Karen’s words.

“Kisaragi Hayato, who is this rude young lady?”

“She is Kisaragi Karen, the younger sister of Hayato-sama, Claire-sama,” the young, blonde boy behind Claire replied.

Appearance-wise, his hair was trimmed short, but his bangs were long – long enough to hide one of his eyes. His features were childish, and his uniform belonged not to the Bugeika, but to the middle school.

“Yes, that does seem to be the case, doesn’t it? Now that I look at them, there certainly is a family resemblance, is there not?” Claire mumbled as she looked at Karen.

“Indeed. That would be the reason for her hostility, Claire-sama,” he responded with an innocent smile.

“...That reminds me, I have yet to introduce myself. I’m a second-year in middle school and Claire-sama’s assistant – Chris Steinbelt. Best regards, Kisaragi Hayato-sama, Karen-sama, and Emil Crossford-sama.”

He bowed deeply.

It seemed he also knew who Emil was.

“In any event, this timing is fortuitous. There’s something I wanted to discuss with you, Kisaragi Hayato.”

“...Discuss? You want to pick up where we left off yesterday?”

“That too, but before that—”

Claire met Hayato’s gaze as she spoke.

“To jump to the heart of the matter, it’s regarding your serving as an assistant to the student council from tomorrow forward.”

“Eh...”

“Wait, what do you mean by that—?!”

Emil, next to the dumbfounded Hayato, raised his voice and pounded the table with both hands as he leapt to his feet.

Clanking loudly, the tableware rattled with the impact.

“—!”

Karen showed a frightened expression.

“Whoops, sorry... Because of yesterday’s incident, I unintentionally flared up.”

Emil apologized to Karen before glaring at Claire once more.

“Yesterday’s duel was a draw, right...? So why does Hayato still have to be an assistant for the student council—?!”

“Emil Crossford, I said we’d make him an assistant for the student council, but I never said anything about making him clean the student council room.”

“...Then what are you planning to have Hayato do?”

“Claire-sama has direct supervision over the student council Selections team— and would like to scout Kisaragi Hayato as a member.”

Erika, who had been standing silently by Claire’s side until now, answered.

“And? Are you interested?”

Claire turned to Hayato once again.

“Well, even if you ask whether or not I’m interested... To be honest, I don’t even know what members of the Selections do...”

“Their duties are nearly identical to the Slayers’. That includes taking requests from the Warslan company, operation of the Hundred, and completing missions.”

They handled a wide range of matters from guarding vital facilities to protecting VIPs, such as world leaders.

"The single most important duty is, of course, to battle the Savage, however," Claire added in a tone which suggested such a thing was only natural, "Although Slayers belong to the Warslan company from the moment they enroll in the Bugeika, they are nevertheless still students, and thus participation in such duties is not mandatory; it is up to each student's own judgment. However, the way I see things..."

After a short pause, Claire continued with a serious expression.

"It's a matter of noblesse oblige. Those with power have an obligation to wield that power for the sake of those without. Such a thing is only natural. This is why the Warslan company provides suitable compensation for those who hold such power."

In other words, increased pay. For Hayato, such an offer was incredibly tempting. That would increase the amount of money he'd be able to send to the facility.

...But could I really do my job as a member of the Selections as I am?

He thought about his duel with Claire.

If he entered the battlefield without the ability to control his power, he might be more of a liability than an asset.

That was reason enough for him to hesitate.

I wonder what Emil thinks?

He turned his gaze her way.

"If you're telling Hayato to join, then I will as well."

Emil seemed more than confident about his ability to enter the Selections.

He was grateful that Emil'd be with him. The thought of being alone made him uneasy, but with Emil by his side, even if something happened, he felt he'd be able to overcome it, one way or another.

Unfortunately, Erika dashed his hopes.

"That's not possible. The requirements for the Selections necessitate that one either possess the ability to fight on equal standing with the Savage or are capable of serving in a pure support capacity. None others are allowed."

Her words brought a thought to Hayato's mind.

That reminds me, even though she was only helping during yesterday's duel, Emil's better with the Hundred than I am. I guess the student council isn't aware of that, huh...

In that case, their rejection was only to be expected.

"So, in other words, all I have to do is demonstrate my abilities."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"I request a duel with Pres. Once I win, I should be free to enter the Selections alongside Hayato, no?"

"How dare you, Emil Crossford!? To suggest that the likes of you could rival Claire-sama!" Ridia, who had been restraining herself this entire time, roared.

I agree, Hayato thought. Her words had been provocative indeed. However, Emil didn't seem intimidated at all.

"You're not going to run away, are you?"

"I'm not. Unfortunately, I cannot accept your proposal, nonetheless."

Claire rejected Emil's proposal. It, of course, was not the end of the matter.

"And why is that?"

"School regulations state that students who participate in a duel may not do so again until a week later."

There were countless people who wanted the chance to duel those with a high rank, but were those duels to happen without end, it'd be a pointless waste of Stamina and Energy.

If the Savage were to appear, it wouldn't be possible to sortie in peak condition. The consequent disabling of Little Garden's greatest force was counterproductive.

The rules were designed to prevent just such a situation.

"It's fine if it isn't you personally. Ridi Steinberg should serve just as well, right? A battle with her would serve to showcase my abilities, would it not?"

"Know your place, Emil Crossford! Even if you do place just after Kisaragi Hayato among the freshmen reaction readings, the difference is still considerable. In any event, a reaction reading and proficiency with the Hundred are two very different things!"

"A fight will reveal everything. When do you want to do it? Right now sounds good to me..."

With those words, Emil took out her Hundred from her chest and threw it into the air.

"HUNDRED ON!"

With her shout, her Hundred, in particles of bluish-white brilliance, enveloped Emil's torso from the hips on up, forming the [Arm's Shroud].

"Emil Crossford, why do you possess a Hundred...?"

Emil's deployment came as a shock to Erika.

"I'll tell you once the duel is over."

"Oi, I haven't even decided whether or not I'm joining, so cut it out!"

"Sorry. I got a bit ahead of myself, I guess..."

At Hayato's prompting, Emil attempted to release her Hundred. Ridia, however, rejected that idea.

"I won't forgive it if you simply back down after such disrespect. I'll show you your place myself— HUNDRED ON!"

Angrily shouting that she'd resolve the matter personally, Ridia clenched her Hundred. She was surrounded by a thick, dark cloud of violet particles and a giant thruster appeared on her back.

Next, a drill-like spear as tall as she appeared in her right hand, accompanied by a shield in her left.

"The weapon's a spear— So a Phalanx type?"

"Correct, my Hundred's of the infantry-style – also known as the Phalanx type. Its Arms' name is the [Ebon Heavenly Spear], the Midgardschlange!"

With that, Ridia turned to Claire.

"Claire-sama, permission to duel..."

"Of course I can't allow something like that! Emil Crossford's Hundred is a Dragoon-type like mine, so you'd put your surroundings in danger with a duel."

Truly the words of a "president", Hayato thought.

Mutters of "What's going on over there?" could be heard as curious students and citizens of Little Garden had assembled. Furthermore, Karen, in her wheelchair, was also present. A duel would also endanger her.

"Nii-san..."

Karen grabbed the hem of Hayato's uniform in concern.

Hayato leapt in front of her wheelchair protectively.

"It's alright, even if something happens, I'll make sure to protect you."

Adapting to the circumstances, Emil spoke up.

"We need to be careful about bystanders— So, it'd be fine as long as we avoid using the Hundred's shooting systems, right?"

With those words, Emil's Hundred formed into a lance.

"You've changed the nature of your Hundred— How on Earth?"

Claire stared in wonder. Ridia and Erika, and eventually even the curious onlookers revealed the same reaction. The commotion from the crowd grew even louder.

“Why are you so surprised? Your Hundred can change forms as well, can it not?”

Hayato recalled that during their duel the day before, Claire had combined [Alystherion’s] six batteries into a giant cannon. Was this somehow different from what Emil had just done?

“Even if the shape of my weapon changed, it was nevertheless of the Dragoon-type throughout. The Hundred’s types are hardcoded at construction. However, Emil Crossford has changed his floating battery Arms – of the Dragoon-type – into a long spear Arms of the Phalanx-type. A change at such a fundamental level like that is no ordinary thing.”

Originally, each Slayer was capable of wielding but one Arms.

A Slayer that could stably employ more than one kind of Hundred was simply unheard of.

“Alright, here I come—!”

Emil, kicking up dirt with a furious leap, attacked Ridi with the lance in her hands.

Seeing her actions, Erika was outraged.

“Even though there hasn’t been a duel declaration, you suddenly start to fight – this is simply outrageous. Stop this insta—”

“Let them continue.”

“...Claire-sama?”

“Please allow me to observe the situation for just a bit.”

Emil’s spear collided with Ridia’s Midgardschlange, generating a terrific sound which shook the courtyard.

Ridi was unable to go on the offensive of her own volition, able only to react to the furious onslaught of blows that came from Emil.

She shifted her gaze to Claire, silently asking for permission.

As Claire nodded, signalling her permission to proceed, Ridia's feelings shone through. Baring her teeth in a broad grin, she repelled Emil's spear with Midgarschlange, sending it flying into the air, and then began preparations to go on the attack.

“With permission, I can finally get serious! Let's see if you're a Slayer who can keep up with one of the Selections!”

“Then I'll get serious as well. I can't take it easy on an opponent like you!”

Ridia's thrusters fired and she accelerated, thrusting Midgarschlange mightily forward. Emil, warding off the blow with a shield formed from [Arms Shroud], sent forth her own spear in attack.

“...Kku—!”

Ridia panicked, blocking the blow with the shield in her left hand.

“Erika, please check the database for Emil Crossford's registered data. What does it say about the form of his Hundred?”

“A moment, please.”

Erika touched the frame of her glasses, causing characters and images to appear on her lenses.

“A monitor?”

“Correct. It is connected to [LiZA] via the Vital Link and is operated by eye movements,” Claire explained.

“...Claire-sama, I have finished verifying his information. It is indeed registered as a Dragoon-type in the database.”

“And yet, he can fight with so many—”

Once again, Claire turned her gaze to Emil.

It was a fact of reality that attaining mastery of even just one Hundred form required overcoming incredible hardship. That notwithstanding, Emil's spear skills were not outdone by Ridia's, even though it was her only specialty; they stood on equal footing.

More worrisome still was the way this Hundred enveloped his entire body.

Unlike Claire's own Hundred, [Alystherion], nothing bearing the slightest resemblance to a gun barrel could be seen in its form. Furthermore, it had now somehow taken on the form of a spear and shield...

What on Earth is it...?

Squinting as she inspected it more closely, she realized that this Hundred did not maintain a fixed form, but was rather more like a mass of particles. As if validating this insight, Emil's spear dissolved back into particles before reforming into yet another shape.

“Not two, but three...!”

Its new form was a boomerang.

Thrown mid-jump, it sent Ridi's Midgardschlange flying before promptly returning.

“Kisaragi Hayato, what do you know about this?”

“What do I know—”

“About Emil Crossford.”

Even if she asked, he wasn't sure if it was okay to answer. In any case, it wasn't like he knew that much about Emil either.

As he stood, uncertain...

“Let me answer that.”

A voice called out from behind them.

Taken by surprise, Claire instantly turned her head.

“Why are you here...?”

Hayato mirrored her action.

Standing there was the main technologist of Little Garden, the head of their research lab, Charlotte Dymandias.

“I’m here to eat, but I happened to overhear you, and thought I’d answer; that’s all. That said, I wonder if I’m allowed to talk about Emil’s Hundred, after all...”

“You do take your time, don’t you? What on Earth is he?”

“Emil and I first met five years ago. At that time, I was visiting a hospital in Gutenburg, having been informed that there was a patient I’d undoubtedly want to see.”

“And that was Emil Crossford?”

“That’s correct.”

Charlotte nodded.

“I soon grew aware of Emil’s unrivaled talent as a Slayer. For that purpose, I’ve bequeathed Emil a personal Hundred and had him take part in some experiments. As a result, he’s become very skilled in both wielding and controlling the Hundred. His skill is to the extent that he can manipulate his reaction readings.”

“That’s... impossible...”

“His reaction reading is comparable to Kisaragi Hayato’s – or rather, at the moment, it should be even higher. Nevertheless, even if his operational skill is high, it is also formless. For that reason, Emil Crossford’s Hundred has no type.”

“.....”

‘That’s unheard of’ was written all over Claire’s face.

“Even for me, it’s my first time meeting someone who can handle the Hundred like that. It’s pretty troubling to me as well, you know? That ‘Innocence’ – which has no type – as well as that [Arms Shroud] which can morph into other types.”

“In other words, you’ve brought Emil Crossford to Little Garden to further your own research?”

“You’re upset that you haven’t been informed? I have been strictly ordered not to disclose the nature of his unique abilities.”

“...If your intentions are to increase the quality of Slayers in Little Garden, then I do not mind.”

Clenching both fists, Claire returned her gaze to the pair who continued their duel uninterrupted.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAA——!”

Though it had borne a different form just a moment prior, Emil once again formed [Arms Shroud] into a spear, faced Ridi, whom had lost [Midgardschlange], and charged.

Panicking, Ridi hastily grabbed [Midgardschlange], granted it her Energy, and parried the blow, but her defense proved inadequate.

“Uagh—!”

Ridi’s body flew into the air.

Emil’s Hundred immediately changed forms once more.

The tip of the spear warped, transforming into a muzzle.

“If I fire from point-blank range, I won’t damage any of our surroundings, right?”

Emil leveled the muzzle directly at Ridi, who had collapsed to the ground, falling on her backside. The barrel shone brilliantly, glittering with concentrated Energy.

“So what’s it gonna be? Do you surrender?” Emil taunted, grinning.

Ridi’s ground her teeth in frustration.

She didn’t want to accept defeat, but there was nothing she could do.

Even if she were to expand an E-Barrier, it was likely incapable of nullifying Emil's shot.

"It's my lo—"

Just as Ridi was about to acknowledge defeat...

Beep, beep...!

A low-toned buzzer rang out simultaneously from Claire, Erika, and Ridi's PDAs.

"What's going on...?" Emil murmured, as she lowered her weapon, Charlotte simultaneously mumbling, "The call's come sooner than expected."

"Call? What call?" Hayato asked.

"Savage have appeared on the neighboring island. A request for support from Little Garden has thus been issued by headquarters."

"You knew this was possible—"

"Yes, that is what I wanted to talk to you all about earlier."

Immediately following Charlotte's reply, sirens all across Little Garden screamed as one.

Afterward, Meimei's voice could be heard echoing from speakers installed along the roads.

"Announcement from HQ, announcement from HQ. A request for support has been issued by the province of Seonia. The presence of three Savage has been confirmed. Little Garden will immediately begin preparations for sortie. Slayers and Bugeika second and third-years are to prepare to sortie immediately and standby. Warslan company staff are to do likewise."

"Erika, prepare the car at once."

"That won't be necessary. When I call for it, it'll already be prepared," Charlotte interrupted, taking her PDA from her pocket.

As described, a long, black stretch limo soon appeared.

It was an eight-seater.

“Claire-sama, let’s go.”

Erika entered the car in a hurry, with Ridi following immediately after.

Claire promptly got in as well.

“Charlotte, are you not coming as well?”

“Just a moment,” Charlotte replied, before walking away from the car to approach Hayato and Emil.

“Kisaragi Hayato, Emil Crossford— You two are coming to the operations room as well.”

“Eh...”

Her unexpected words took Hayato by surprise.

As they did Claire.

“CHARLOTTE DIAMONDUS, WHAT ON EARTH IS THE MEANING OF THIS?!”

“Claire, you invited Kisaragi Hayato to be a Selections member, did you not? I thought this would prove a valuable learning opportunity for him to watch you in action.”

With those words, Charlotte turned to Claire.

“Moreover, there is currently a lack of proficient Slayers aboard this warship, a fact of which you, more than anyone, are certainly aware. On-the-job training is faster, is it not?”

“.....”

Claire could not rebut her words.

“...I understand. There is indeed truth to what you have said.”

Sighing in resignation, Claire continued.

“You heard, correct? Kisaragi Hayato, Emil Crossford: please get in the car.”

“Nii-san...”

“It’ll be fine.”

Hayato placed his hand atop Karen’s head, she having grabbed his uniform in unease.

“He has yet to decide whether or not he will join the Selections. He won’t have to enter the battlefield.”

“But...”

“Kisaragi Hayato, what are you doing?! We’re racing against time here, you know?!” Claire screamed from within the car.

Emil had already joined the others in the car.

“That just leaves...”

Hayato turned his gaze to Charlotte.

“You can leave your sister to me; I’ll ensure that she’s properly escorted to the hospital. I’ll join you in the operations room once that’s done. You guys go on ahead.”

“Then I leave her in your care.”

With that, Hayato walked toward the car.

“Nii-san, have a safe trip,” Karen called out from behind him.

“Yeah, I’ll be going then,” Hayato answered with a smile as he turned and waved before entering the car.

Chapter 5: Sortie/UNKNOWN/Awakening

The operations room was located on the third basement floor of the Bugeika school building.

It was every bit as dark and gloomy as the lab was; a necessity given the floating monitors suspended in every nook and cranny of the room which were even now projecting images being transmitted from the computer.

It looks pretty busy...

The room was charged with an atmosphere of nervous tension, perhaps only to be expected given the current state of emergency.

The clothing and ages of the ten within the room varied wildly; that notwithstanding, they were uniformly engaged in frantically running their fingers over their optical keyboards while conversing via the microphones attached to their headsets.

From what could be overheard, it was apparent that intel—transmitted both from Warslan headquarters in Liberia as well as from the region in which the Savage had appeared—was being organized and analyzed.

“Those within this room include members of the Warslan Company’s intelligence division as well as middle- and high-school students of the Futsuuka who, having achieved excellent grades, cooperate with the Bugeika.”

In response to Claire’s proud declaration, the girls and boys within the room, who all appeared to be younger than Hayato, collectively bowed and saluted. Their reaction spanned just the briefest moment, however, before they returned to their duties in earnest.

“Right then, I’ll station myself here.”

Claire’s assistant, Chris, who had accompanied them to the room, seated himself on a now-empty chair.

The seat he'd taken was next to Meimei, the subordinate of Charlotte, the main technologist of the lab.

"Is he a technologist as well then?"

"No, Chris isn't a technologist, but the main analyst."

Analysts, naturally, were specialists at using computers, compiling intel, and operating programs that performed analysis through calculations.

"Chris' skills are superior even to members of the Warslan Company's intelligence division, let alone a typical high school student. So? How's the situation?"

Claire began her inquiries as she approached Chris and Meimei.

"The location where the Savage have made their appearance is within the François territory at the heart of the Zwei Archipelago."

Meimei, compiling intel from the operation seat, answered. Continuing, she expounded upon the Zwei Archipelago in greater depth.

The archipelago was heart-shaped when seen from above, and was a renowned tourist attraction.

It had a population of roughly five thousand residents, as well as roughly a thousand visitors at any given time.

Kirishima Sakura had scheduled a live concert for the day.

"Because of the concert, people from all over have made their way to the island, and there is nearly ten thousand people there right now. It's quite chaotic."

"Kirishima Sakura? Do you know who that is?" Claire asked Hayato, prompted by the mention of that name.

Perhaps it was because her name sounded like it belonged to an inhabitant of the Yamato Empire.

"Well, I've definitely heard that name before somewhere... If I remember correctly, she's an idol, I think...?"

"I can gather that much just from hearing that she's putting on a live concert. I'm asking whether you know anything about her beyond that."

She seemed rather offput at his unexpected response, but he didn't know any more than he'd already explained, so he couldn't answer.

"Emil, do you know anything?"

"Nope. I'm not into that kinda thing, Emil replied, shaking her head from side to side.

Taken aback by their responses, a voice expressed surprise.

"...Neither of you have heard of Kirishima Sakura? You two really are the same, aren't you?"

Charlotte stood before the door that Hayato and the others had passed through just a moment ago.

"In this day and age, when Vocaloids are at their peak, she is able to vie for victory with her natural voice alone; Kirishima Sakura is a world-renowned idol from the Yamato Empire."

One of Kirishima Sakura's songs flowed forth from the PDA in her hand.

Listening to it, Emil muttered, "You know, I think I remember hearing this when we visited Central..."

"Yeah, I think you're right."

As he thought about it, he had the impression that he hadn't heard it just in Central, but back in Yamato as well..

That's right, Karen was listening to it...

Hearing the song, he finally remembered.

"That reminds me, Karen did make it back to the hospital, right?"

That concern had been weighing on his mind ever since they'd arrived.

“It was hard to get her to stay there as she wanted to be by your side, but I managed,” Charlotte replied, pausing the song and returning her PDA to her pocket.

“Is that so? That’s a relief.”

“...Has HQ’s data on the Savage in the Zwei Archipelago arrived yet?”

“It has.”

“Project it onto the monitors at once.”

“Yes!”

With a nod, Meimei tapped away furiously on her optical keyboard.

“Headquarters say that they’re sending reinforcements, but it’ll be another two and a half hours until they arrive. To minimize damage, forces in Little Garden are to remain on standby.”

“Not only are we not allowed to destroy them, we must even stay inside? Nii-sama sure is making light of our strength, isn’t he...?”

Claire’s jaw clenched; she seemed vexed.

Her expression showed her confidence that they’d be able to handle the situation.

“But Claire-sama, this ship’s Slayers lack prior experience in battle, so it can’t be helped, right? Furthermore, while two of the three Savage might be smallish normal types, but one of them is enormous, and looks like nothing we’ve ever seen before. We don’t know about its abilities—it’s an [UNKNOWN].”

As he spoke, Chris manipulated the floating monitor.

“I was able to pull together a picture of the [UNKNOWN]. I’ll project it immediately.”

“It certainly is massive, isn’t it...” Claire muttered.

Indeed, when compared to his memories of them from his childhood, it was at least five times as large – no, more than that – than the Savage he had seen ten years ago.

It didn't need to be said that getting stomped on was a life-threatening situation, and a full-body attack would shatter one's bones. The blasts from its head were, similarly, far larger than a typical Savage's, and their power could not be denied. Given the situation, it was only a matter of time before the town would be utterly decimated.

"If we don't do something, and fast..." Hayato murmured, biting his lips in frustration.

There was undoubtedly a vast horde of people out of view of the camera, scurrying about in panic as they attempted to flee.

"This is both why we have Slayers as well as why the lot of you chose to become Slayers."

With a grin, Charlotte turned to Chris.

"Chris Steinbert, forward the data on the Savage and our two freshmen to [LiZA]. Have her carry out a tactical simulation and select members to sortie."

"Charlotte Dymandias! You couldn't possibly mean to have [LiZA] select Kisaragi Hayato and the others to..."

"I do."

Charlotte nodded unconcernedly at Chris, on whose face was a look of utter disbelief.

"Countless Slayers were injured during the Savage hive capture operation in Guinea the other day; Little Garden has an insufficient number of Slayers at the moment. I suspect the head office's order to standby is because they have yet to receive our most current data. Once that lack is amended, I believe they will reconsider their position."

"Wait a sec. You mean *we* are going to fight the Savage?" Hayato interjected.

This was not a situation he'd foreseen.

"Of course. That's why you guys are here, after all, isn't it?" Charlotte affirmed with a nod.

"That's why I said to wait, Charlotte Dymandias! Your actions are overhasty. In any event, [LiZA] would never choose them..."

"According to my simulation, a solution will reveal itself. This is for the sake of eliminating the Savage. Moreover, you want to get the better of your Bro-of HQ as well, do you not?"

"....."

After several seconds of silent consideration, Claire revealed her decision without truly answering Charlotte's question.

"...Understood. We can always reconsider once [LiZA] has given us the simulation results, right?"

"Inputting data for Hayato Kisaragi-san and Emil Crossford-san. Submitting request to perform selection for members of the sortie party. This will take just a minute, Claire-sama."

Though still confused, Chris nevertheless manipulated his keyboard to fulfill the request.

"Data submission and analysis complete."

He'd said it'd take a minute, but he was done after only 30 seconds.

"Now displaying the results of the sortie member selection recommended by [LiZA]."

"That's..."

From behind her glasses, Erika's eyes widened and a surprised voice leaked from her mouth as she took in the results of the analysis, displayed on the monitors lining the walls of the interior of the operations room. The other students in the room, along with members of Warslan's intel division, echoed her shock.

“Chris, this isn’t some kind of joke, is this?”

“No. Without a doubt, this is the solution that [LiZA] has come up with. There will be limited casualties and the members with a greatest chance of success are——”

At these latest words, Claire’s gaze returned to the monitor once more.

Displayed there were the three members of the student council – Claire, Ridi, and Erika – as well as Hayato and Emil.

“Any objections, Claire Harvey?” Charlotte asked Claire with an easy grin.

“...If that’s [LiZA]’s answer, then I can only obey. This is Little Garden’s law.”

“And you, Kisaragi Hayato and Emil Crossford? Are you two ready for a sortie?”

“That’s...”

Hayato shifted his gaze to Emil, who had been asked as well.

“Let’s do it. If anything happens, I’ll be there for you.”

“Okay... I understand.”

With Emil’s words for support, Hayato nodded.

“That means you’re ready?”

“Yes.”

This time, he nodded much more strongly.

“In that case, as captain of Little Garden, follow my command. First, Chris——Issue a request to the maintenance crew to begin special transport preparations!”

“Understood. Contacting the airport maintenance crew. Urgent: requesting special air transport WL-03 preparations.”

“Ridi Steinberg, Erika Candle, Kisaragi Hayato, and Emil Crossford – you will board the WL-03 alongside myself. Change into your Variable Suits, make any necessary adjustments, and prepare to sortie. We will gather in this

operations room in ten minutes, at 1922 hours. Charlotte Dymandias, you will provide assistance as necessary. All remaining personnel are to analyze the [UNKNOWN] and provide intel.”

※※※

Hayato and the others boarded the private Little Garden aircraft and headed for the Zwei Archipelago where the Savage had appeared.

Traditionally, Slayers were ferried by helicopter, but, pressed for time as they were, they instead used the WL-03, a tilt-rotor, vertical take-off aircraft owned by the Warslan Company and stationed at Little Garden.

Located within its extravagant fuselage was a briefing room, consisting of an office, a parlor, and a communications room; a bedroom; a sick bay; a workshop for tuning the Hundred; a room for Variable Suit maintenance; and a shower.

Claire, as Little Garden’s captain, was granted personal use of this aircraft. Aboard it now, were its pilot and crew and seven others: the five Slayers – the three student council members and the two freshmen – as well as the main technologist Charlotte and her assistant Meimei.

“Everyone looks ready for battle.”

After takeoff, Hayato and the others had adjusted their Variable Suits and proceeded to gather in the briefing room.

They were about to work out a plan of action.

The CIC here was smaller than Little Garden’s operations room, but similar in design, with a large screen installed within.

“Very soon now, the five people recommended by [LiZA] a short while ago will engage the Savage,” Claire said, turning her gaze to the screen alongside the other student council members.

Depicted there was a map of an island, with the current location of each Savage clearly indicated.

“The first wave of the sortie will be executed by us, the student council team. We’ll engage the normal type at the top of the map, designated $[\alpha]$. Once it’s been brought down, we’ll begin our assault on target $[\gamma]$, the unknown type. The freshmen team will then sortie and commence battle with target $[\beta]$, the remaining normal type.”

“Why don’t both teams sortie at the same time?” Emil inquired.

“Because you have no experience battling the Savage,” Claire replied flatly.

“Savage movements differ drastically from a human’s—— If you are unfamiliar with those movements, you’ll only be needlessly injured. Therefore, the student council group will go first, and our battle will provide you a reference.”

“So this is the strategy [LiZA] proposed, huh...”

At Hayato’s mutter, a deep buzzing sound echoed and the color of the screen changed. White letters against a red background displayed the word [NEGATIVE].

“[NEGATIVE], huh...”

“The plan is roughly identical to the one devised by [LiZA] except that the point Emil-sama has just raised was changed by Claire-sama out of concern for Hayato-sama and Emil-sama.”

Meimei’s explanation caused Claire to blush.

“T-That’s not it. If the freshmen were to be seriously wounded, it’d be a blow to Little Garden and as the student council president...”

“Well then, let’s just begin our preparations, shall we?”

Charlotte laughed loudly.

Sullen, Claire nevertheless continued with the strategy meeting.

“...If you manage to bring down normal type $[\beta]$, we can consider the mission complete.”

“In other words, we are not to engage the [UNKNOWN]...”

“Yes, its only opponent will be the student council. Rather than actual combat, think of today as gaining combat experience.”

“Will you really be alright by yourselves? That Savage is huge, and it looks really strong...”

“Don’t take us lightly, Emil Crossford! To this day, countless Savage have fallen before us, a vast number of which were also unknown types,” Ridi retorted, radiating confidence.

Claire spoke up next.

“Leave the [UNKNOWN] to we who have experience. [LiZA] likely agrees that the possibility of its extermination lies solely with us.”

[LiZA] did not refute her words.

The crew of the WL-03 reported in next.

“Claire-sama, we are now above the Zwei Archipelago. We have confirmed the presence of a Savage at——3 o’clock.”

“Project it onto the main monitor.”

After a few quick taps on the keyboard from Chris, the image of a Savage was displayed on the main monitor.

“The image you saw earlier was the [UNKNOWN], but this is a normal type. Utilizing our earlier designations, this is target [α],” Meimei added helpfully.

It was roughly three to five meters tall, about the same size as the Savage Hayato had met encountered once before.

She continued, “At present, the [UNKNOWN]’s attacks are identical to that of a normal type: it attacks with its two pincered claws and fires barrages of beams from its head. Therefore the [UNKNOWN] has been determined to be a Trenta and will henceforth be referred to as such.”

“...Understood. In that case, let’s begin.”

Claire headed for the briefing room’s exit.

Her two fellow student council members followed.

“Follow me please.”

Pressed by Erika, Hayato, Emil, and Charlotte quickly trailed after.

They arrived at a hatch.

By its side was a door labeled “flammable”. When opened by Erika, it revealed an extensive arsenal of weaponry lined up within.

The majority of their number were heavy weapons. Erika took hold of a giant weapon with nine barrels, one half as tall as she was, and rested it upon her shoulder.

“That’s...”

Charlotte, noticing Hayato’s surprise at the display, opened her mouth to speak.

“The design of the Weimar Empire-developed rocket launcher has been improved upon, resulting in this Fliegerfaust. It’s an artillery weapon capable of firing nine rockets at once.”

It, of course, did not use normal rockets. As an anti-Savage weapon, its rockets were loaded with a greater quantity of gunpowder as compared to their more typical counterparts.

“I assume you know that originally, before the development of the Hundred, the Savage were suppressed with projectile weaponry, right?”

“That much I know, but...”

“Then this’ll go quickly. Ordnance can both deal damage – though slight – and throw up a smokescreen which can serve as camouflage, and all that without consuming any Energy. When it comes to a preemptive strike, they’re the optimal choice. The preservation of Energy is priceless.”

As Charlotte’s explanation drew to a close, an icy gust blew through the interior of the WL-03.

Erika had opened the hatch.

“The François army is already evacuating, correct?”

“Affirmative. There are no heat signatures within a 300-meter radius of the [α] Savage,”

Meimei replied to Erika’s question.

“...Understood. Then I’m beginning the operation.”

With that, Erika leapt from the craft, looking entirely accustomed to this action.

Promptly adjusting her posture mid-air, she set up the Fliegerfaust, took aim, and——pulled the trigger.

With a loud roar, nine rockets were released, drawing white contrails through the sky as they raced toward the targeted Savage.

“Ridi, I’m going.”

“Yes, Claire-sama.”

Moments later, seeing a cloud of dust whirling into the air with an explosive boom, Claire and Ridi jumped out the hatch as Erika had before them.

“HUNDRED ON!”

Raising their voices in unison, they extended their weapons.

“HUNDRED ON!”

Erika, who had discarded the Fliegerfaust, followed suit and was bathed in a yellow light.

“Vice President Glasses’ Hundred sure has an unusual form, doesn’t it? What exactly is that?” Hayato muttered without thinking.

The weapons belonging to Prez, Ridi, Emil, and himself were unchanged from how they had appeared during their duels. This, however, was his first time seeing Erika’s. What had manifested in her hand looked to be a pink-colored chain.

"Her weapon's of the Arsène-type and has been given the name [Everlasting]. Erika can expand and contract it as well as control its hardness at will," Charlotte replied to Hayato's question.

"It is, of course, also possible to ensnare the Savage with it, and by constricting, deal damage to them. Watch."

Hayato turned to watch the battle, now displayed on a ceiling-mounted monitor.

The Savage, struck by the rocket barrage, swung both its pincered claws while raising a somewhat muffled voice. However, it cut only air...

The normal type [α] had ascertained the existence of its enemy, but it didn't seem to have a precise grasp of her movements, likely due to the smokescreen thrown up by Fliegerfaust's attack.

Erika hurled [Everlasting] from her hand.

It expanded as it beelined toward its target, immobilizing its body.

"Claire-sama, now!"

Erika, who'd since touched down upon the ground, tightened the grip [Everlasting] had on the Savage yet further still.

As she landed, Claire Harvey took aim.

The six floating batteries, which had unfurled around her, combined to form the Buster Cannon.

This was the very same weapon that she had fired at Hayato during their duel.

"Claire is targeting its core located in its head," Charlotte added in explanation.

As might be expected from something known as the "steel carapace", the shell covering the surface of a Savage's body was incredibly hard. What lay behind it was the core, after all, the Savage analog to a human heart. Accordingly, the Shelter protecting the core was harder than any metal

found on Earth. Weapons and bullets made of ordinary metal could hardly scratch it.

“...But if it’s on the receiving end of an attack from the Hundred and Energy, it’s a different story. The destruction of its core is all it takes to bring a Savage to its knees. Just watch.”

“Eat this—!”

She unleashed a dense mass of Energy at the Savage which impacted its head, as planned.

The Savage’s body was rocked by an explosion.

“Shelter destruction confirmed!” Meimei’s voice called out from within the WL-03.

This was conveyed to Claire’s team via the Variable Suit’s wireless function.

“I’ll end this!”

After Erika and Claire’s attack, Ridi intimated that it was her turn next. She assumed attack posture, used her Energy to Accelerate, and charged toward the Savage.

Kicking off the ground, she flew into the air.

Her lance raised overhead, she took aim at the exposed core.

“This is your end—!”

She swung the pointed tip of [Midgardschlange] downward and let gravity take hold.

Unfortunately, as might be expected, it wasn’t just the Shelter that was hard – the core was as well. It cracked, but failed to shatter.

[Midgardschlange], however, was not yet clad with Energy.

“If it isn’t easily destroyed after this, then the freshmen will keep taking us lightly! U000000000000000000—!”

Ridi shouted while driving Energy into her weapon. The blade began to rotate like a drill, and its tip bit deeply into the core.

The enemy loosed a muted cry.

Its core turned reddish-brown and burst apart.

Toppling forward, the Savage crumpled to the ground.

“We did it, didn’t we?” Claire muttered in satisfaction.

“Did you see that, freshmen?! That’s the true strength of the student council!”

Ridi, panting heavily, leapt away from the Savage’s body and landing on the ground, pointed her index finger at the WL-03.

“Next it’s your guys’ turn. Are you prepared?”

A transmission from Claire reached Hayato and the others, whom had been watching the student council members’ figures on the monitor.

“.....Yeah.”

As Hayato agreed, Emil patted his shoulder with vigor.

“Let’s sortie too, Hayato.”

“Sortie... you...”

“Emil-sama, as you can see, this aircraft is still mid-descent. Please restrain yourself for another three minutes,” Meimei said, echoing Hayato’s surprise.

Waiting, however, had no part in Emil’s plans.

“A single Savage is all it takes to destroy the town. Time is a luxury we don’t have, you know?”

“Don’t tell me you plan to jump like Prez did?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Emil nodded nonchalantly.

I was hoping she was just kidding, but she seriously...

Smiling wryly, Hayato looked outside the still-open hatch.

An endless blue expanse greeted him. It was roughly 100 meters to the ground.

“You already saw Prez and the others do this earlier, right? As long as you deploy your Hundred properly, you shouldn’t have any problems landing. That will show them that we can do this.”

“Wait, oi...?”

Emil suddenly embraced Hayato, standing before the hatch, from behind.

With that weight, Hayato dropped through the doorway.

“UWAA—?!”

With the wind rushing against body, he instinctively closed his eyes.

Preventing his stupor was Emil.

“Hayato, you need to deploy your Hundred!”

“I-I KNOW ALREADY!”

If I don’t, I’m dead!

Reaching into the deepest reserves of his lungs, he howled:

“HUNDRED ON—!”

He’d somehow managed to deploy his Hundred.

His right arm was completely enveloped by Protectors and [Hien] materialized in his hand.

“That went just fine, didn’t it? Next, use your Energy to soften the impact of your landing. If you fail, your legs will probably break, okay?”

“A-Alright...”

“Okay, I’ll deploy mine now, alright?”

Emil, having separated herself from Hayato’s back, pulled her Hundred out from within her cleavage and commanded it to deploy.

“HUNDRED ON!”

With those words, [Arms Shroud] encircled Emil’s body. What appeared next were not the floating batteries he had seen before, but two large and lengthy gun turrets.

“I’ll use these to deal it a hefty blow like Vice President Glasses just did. That should keep *that* from moving for an instant, and after I throw up a smokescreen, it shouldn’t be able to follow our movements.”

Emil prepared her two gun turrets and charged them with Energy.

“...From within the cover provided by the smokescreen, you aim for its core. If it’s your [Hien], you should be able to destroy both the Shelter and core with a single strike.”

“Got it!”

“Alright, here we go!”

Once charging was complete, Emil shot two light orbs, one after another, at the target.

One orb directly struck its head as planned.

The other struck its feet, but that, too, was part of the plan.

An enormous cloud of dust was thrown up by the dual explosions.

Hayato and Emil seized the opportunity to touch down.

It certainly does look like the enemy can’t discern our whereabouts, huh...

Learning forward as it sought out its enemies, its antennae repeatedly waved from side to side.

Failing to locate either Emil or Hayato, it continued its rampage amid the town.

Its feelers aside, its toughness was the real deal.

“We need to hurry and stop it.”

Although the townspeople had long since been evacuated, any more damage done to the town would drastically increase the time needed to rebuild it.

I guess we should begin the plan then, huh...

Hayato kicked off the ground with Energy.

From within the cover provided by the smokescreen, he leapt at its head – and the core within – and draping [Hien] in his Energy, he assaulted it with his blade.

CLANG—!

With a violent sound, an intense vibration ran up his arm.

“It’s even harder than I expected...”

Hayato landed on the ground for a moment.

Although he’d destroyed a piece of the Shelter, only the tip of [Hien]’s blade had reached the core.

He’d left barely a scratch.

...Then, again—!

Deciding upon a course of action, Hayato prepared to jump again, only for his figure to be seized upon by an enormous eye.

—*Oh crap—!*

The smokescreen covering the battlefield had faded.

Allowing the enemy to find him with ease.

It promptly assumed an attacking posture before swinging its right claw downward.

“Hayato, dodge!”

Guided by those words, Hayato vaulted horizontally, the Savage’s pincered claw stabbing into the ground instead.

Emil commenced her attack.

“TEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—!”

What she held in her hands were not the two gun turrets from before.

...That's... are those scissors?

They weren't ordinary scissors, of course.

They were a meter long, with a large gap between their blades. She swung them, catching the Savage's right arm in the gap between them.

JAKIN—!

The Savage shrieked in pain.

A fluorescent yellow liquid gushed forth from the wound and its pincered arm fell to the floor, severed.

“Hayato, it's coming again!”

“Right!”

The Savage swung its other arm in fury.

Only to fall prey, once again, to Emil's scissors.

Again, the fluorescent liquid spurted as its other arm was cut off.

“Hayato, now! Go for its core!”

“I know!”

With both its arms lost, the Savage rose to its full height, opened its head, and fired a barrage.

Defending against its actions, Hayato, who had leapt into the air, struck his enemy directly with [Hien]. This not only prevented its attack but also forced it to the ground. However, though major damage had been done to its Shelter, its core had yet to be damaged.

Thus Hayato prepared his third attack.

Emil suddenly shouted.

“Hayato, move—!”

Turning, he watched as Emil transformed the scissors in her hands into a white bow.

A bow with neither bowstring nor arrows.

However, it suddenly radiated with white light – and arrows shining with that same light materialized in her hands.

The light of Energy.

Emil took aim at the nucleus of the core.

“I’ll end it with this—!”

SHUPAN—.....!

Emil loosed an Energy arrow from her white bow.

Shearing the air itself in half, the arrow flew toward its target along a straight path and, threading the gap in the Shelter, pierced through the center of the core!

“Did we do it...?”

“Yeah—”

With a crack, the core began to splinter.

As a brilliant smile took hold of Emil’s face, she lowered her bow. The pale arrow grew steadily brighter before exploding. The core lost its radiance and shattered.

As fluorescent liquid poured out, the [β] Savage crumpled.

At that sight, they finally felt the joy of victory.

“There’s no time to enjoy this victory though, right?” Emil said, her gaze wandering toward another battlefield... where the student council team had engaged the [UNKNOWN].

“That does seem to be the case, yes...”

As he shifted his gaze to the student council team, Hayato's expression grew tense.

Though over 300 meters away, they could feel the intensity of the battle against the Trenta.

The Trenta was at least five times larger than the Savage Emil and Hayato had just dealt with.

That alone was sufficient to cause the firepower of the barrage it loosed from its head to be in another class altogether, and each swing of its pincer-claws kicked up violent clouds of dust with an accompanying boom.

Each claw was itself the size of a normal type Savage, so even dodging was difficult.

“Hayato, there!”

Following Emil's shout, Hayato watched as Ridi Steinberg was thrown into the air before impacting the ground heavily, struck by the Trenta's antennae.

She'd managed to block with her shield as well as erect an E-Barrier, so any damage had been neutralized.

However, her weapon vanished.

“...That's... She's out of Energy, right?”

“Yes.”

Charlotte said through the Variable Suit, responding to his question.

“She was exhausted even before beginning the battle. Even though her Vitality's hit the critical zone, her life shouldn't be in any danger.”

“So it's because of our duel...”

Emil was filled with guilt.

When they had battled in the courtyard earlier, Emil had dealt Ridi a considerable amount of damage.

Although she had rested during the period until they'd arrived, that damage had undoubtedly hindered her Energy restoration.

"Kuu, how dare you do that to Ridi!" muttered Claire, before being shortly targeted by the Trenta's claw...

"I won't let you do as you please!"

Erika twined her pink-colored chains around it in an instant. It thus couldn't complete its swing, but...

"KYA—!"

The Savage jumped behind her, the impact throwing her body clear into the air.

"This can't be - it's powerful enough that [Everlasting] can't keep up...!"

As the Trenta landed, Erika's body struck the ground and bounced twice or thrice.

She'd been dealt a considerable amount of damage by that. Although, unlike Ridi, her weapon was still materialized, her suit was torn, and blood dripped from her exposed skin. [Everlasting], which had bound the Trenta's arm, shattered into pieces and disappeared.

Watching the scene of devastation, Hayato said, "We should go offer our help, right?"

"Yeah, I think so too," Emil agreed.

Their course of action was decided.

"Let's join the Prez then!"

"That won't be necessary!"

Just as Hayato and Emil were about to head to the battlefield once again, Claire's voice called out from their Variable Suits.

"You two remain there on standby. I said that the Trenta is the student council's opponent, did I not?!"

“What are you saying? Now’s not the time for that kind of thing!”

Ridi had collapsed and Erika was injured—— No matter how skilled a Hundred operator she might be, to fight that humongous Trenta alone was simply not that simple.

And yet...

“I’ll be fine.”

Claire’s calm did not flee.

“We’ve been through many such situations until now, and we somehow managed every time!”

An intense light was emitted from Claire’s body, who was shouting.

As she engaged her Full-body Armament, heavy Protectors enveloped her body and an enormous thruster materialized on her back.

Filling the thruster with her Energy, she took off.

“PETAL—!”

Shouting as she threw her arms out, more than ten Petals shot forth from her thruster.

“How’s that—!”

The Trenta collapsed, skewered by numerous beams firing from every direction which threw up clouds of dust.

That notwithstanding, Claire didn’t let up with her attacks.

[Alystherion] turned on its side and combined into one once more, again forming the Buster Cannon.

Holding it with both arms, she took aim at the Savage. It seemed Claire intended to end this with the next shot.

“I’ll destroy you and the Shelter together!”

However, she never fired.

Just as she'd taken aim at the core, shining brightly from within the dust cloud, her target moved. The Trenta had stood!

Within the cloud of dust, something flashed.

...It couldn't be... it fired?!

This was unexpected. From the other side of the dust cloud, a thick beam of light came rushing toward her.

“...Ku—!”

Hurriedly, Claire split the Buster Cannon into its six floating gun batteries and arrayed them before her in defense.

Although, thanks to her defensive measures, she emerged unscathed, she'd lost what little ground she'd gained.

Just as Claire was about to commence her Petal attack once again...

“Please wait, we'll assist you too!” Hayato shouted.

She realized that the voice hadn't reached her via her Variable Suit.

“You two! I told you to watch from afar, didn't I?!” she shouted back, shifting her gaze to the two.

“Judging by your earlier attack, won't it be difficult to stop this guy's movements with just your Petals? Moreover, the vice presidents are in no condition to fight right now, so please let us fight!”

“But...”

Hayato's argument was sound.

But Claire nonetheless hesitated, a worried look on her face.

“It'll be fine, we won't be beaten so easily. Anyway, we're joining in with or without your permission, right?”

Emil winked at Hayato.

A transmission from Charlotte interrupted their debate.

“Claire, can you hear me? The Trenta is a more troublesome Savage than predicted. [LiZA] concurs that victory will be difficult to obtain without the three of you cooperating.”

“We can do this if we fight together,” Hayato said, attempting to sway Claire once more.

“...I understand.”

After frowning for several moments more, Claire, who had sunk into a contemplative silence, opened her mouth to mask her thoughts.

“If you’re going that far to persuade me, it can’t be helped. This is [LiZA]’s judgement, after all, so let’s fight together.”

“Yes! Thank you. Then Prez, please distract that giant Savage with your Petals like earlier. I’ll bombard it. When its movements pause from the impact, Hayato will charge. If that proves insufficient to destroy the core, I’ll follow up. How does that sound?”

“Right.” “Understood.”

Hayato nodded, as did Claire.

“Alright, let’s commence the operation then.”

With the strategy decided upon, all that was left to do was to play their respective parts. Her actions seemingly declaring this fact, Claire’s thruster fired, and she shot into the air.

“Go, Petals—! Harass the Trenta!”

Claire deployed her Petals around the enemy’s body.

That would catch its attention for sure. The Trenta faced the Petals and commenced its attack, attempting to throw them off with its antennae, firing beams from its head over and over again.

Targeting its now defenseless body, Emil attempted to attack with her Hundred’s Long Shooter, of a shape similar to Claire’s Buster Cannon, formed from her [Arms Shroud]. Its muzzle was already filled with Energy; the charging was done.

“G0000000000000000———!”

The concentrated discharge hit the Trenta’s massive frame directly, halting its movements.

“Hayato, now!”

“Right!”

Hayato kicked off the ground with all his might, hurling himself into the air like a spring, swung [Hien] at the Trenta’s Shelter.

GAKIN—!

His arms felt numb. The Shelter that protected the core was incredibly hard; the normal type Savage’s had been flimsy by comparison. Even though his strike had been filled with Energy, he hadn’t done it any damage, instead leaving only a small dent.

“Alright, Hayato! I’m coming through next—!”

Emil’s cry reached his ears. As agreed upon earlier, she planned to follow up on his attack. Emil used her Energy and vaulted high into the air.

Transforming [Arms Shroud] yet again, the weapon she brought forth next was none other than a Grim Reaper’s scythe. She intended to attack the Trenta with it.

Hayato pulled [Hien] back mid-swing, and opened some distance.

“TEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—!”

Emil’s scythe swung down on the Shelter.

However, its sharp tip fared no better than Hayato’s [Hien] had.

“Ku— that thing’s still too hard!”

She flipped a reverse somersault mid-air before landing.

“Emil Crossford, you should know that damage has accumulated nonetheless. At present, Shelter integrity lies at 25%. A little more should do it,” Erika communicated.

Her glasses displayed the Trenta's data, relayed to her live by [LiZA], which she was continuously analyzing.

“In that case, then I’m up next—!”

“Claire-sama—?!”

Claire’s behavior was utterly unexpected for Emil, Hayato, and even Erika, who had called out in shock. Claire, ascending into the air by firing her thrusters at full throttle, deployed her Petals once more, and initiated a storm of beam fire.

The onslaught pressed the Trenta, likely for the sake of creating an opening to attack its Shelter.

Finally having closed the distance, Claire again turned [Alystherion] on its side. The tips of its six gun batteries crackled with overflowing energy.

“I beg your pardon for going full-throttle and unleashing a Full-Burst on you—!”

Powerful beams were simultaneously discharged from four barrels at once in a vicious attack on the Shelter.

“Erika, what’s the situation now?”

“Shelter integrity remains at 13%. One, maybe two more attacks are still needed!”

“...Tsk. Then once more—!”

Grimacing, she attempted to fill [Alystherion] with Energy once more, only to be interrupted by an emergency alert sounding from her Variable Suit.

“...That’s... a lie, right...?”

The blood drained from Claire’s face – because the warning had reported an Energy shortage.

In a normal situation, this much would have been...

However, this situation was anything but “normal”.

Although her situation wasn't as extreme as Ridi's, whom had dueled only a short time ago, the Energy she had spent on the duel the other day had yet to completely replenish itself. Although she'd already been notified of the situation during her maintenance when changing——

“Claire-sama—, dodge—!”

Erika's pained cry brought her back to reality, but the Trenta's scissors were already just before her.

There was no time to dodge. Furthermore, with her Energy exhausted as it was, blowing away the massive body in front of her didn't seem possible either.

——*Is this... it?*

As the thought filled her mind, just before it had reached her——

“Are you okay—?!”

The next thing she heard was that voice.

“Kisaragi... Hayato... why did you...?”

“What do you mean ‘why’? We’re in this together, so it’s only natural that I’d help, right?”

Hayato had discharged his Energy beneath his feet, launching himself toward Claire with extreme speed. By taking her body into his embrace as he flew by, they’d managed to avoid the enemy’s attack by a hair’s breadth.

“And I appreciate that, but what’s with this pose and your hand...?”

“...Eh?”

At Claire’s words, her face turned away in embarrassment, Hayato suddenly realized where his hands were placed. His left hand was touching her bottom and his right hand was *again* gripping her breast tightly.

“WAA, sorry—!”

Flustered, Hayato released his hand from her breast. Her face still dyed a deep crimson, Claire mumbled, “Why do you always snatch away all my firsts...?”

“Firsts...?”

“The princess carry... being forced into such an appearance, this unexpected thing, I mean that—”

Claire pursed her lips, pouting.

If she were to be seen in this state, being carried by a man in this manner, she didn’t think she could handle the embarrassment.

It was, of course, the first time in her life she’d been held in the arms of a man like this.

“No, that’s... You know, now’s not the time to think about things like that—!”

“It’s your fault...”

“That’s why I said I’m *really* sorry!”

As Hayato tried to apologize once again, the expression on Claire’s face suddenly turned to shock.

“Kisaragi Hayato, a barrage is coming!”

Glancing over his shoulder at her words, he saw the Trenta opening its head.

Hayato immediately began preparations to dodge the incoming beam, but he froze as Erika interrupted.

“Can you hear me, Kisaragi Hayato? Please negate the Trenta’s volley with your Barrier! It’s on a direct path to hit the Zwei Archipelago’s airport!”

“Wait, that’s...”

“If we dodge, the airport will be struck instead,” Claire murmured by his ear. “But, Kisaragi Hayato, if it’s you, you should be able to stop it.”

“...I don’t know whether it’s possible or not, but I have to at least try.”

If he remembered correctly, many people should’ve been gathered there.

In other words, there would likely be many casualties were it to be struck directly.

“What are you so worried about? When you neutralized my attack during the duel, you employed an N-Barrier, did you not? If you deploy one now, we should be just fine.”

“I think I mentioned this already once before, but that wasn’t something I consciously did; I wasn’t conscious then, after all...”

“Tha— Now that you mention it...”

She seemed to have recalled their conversation in the hospital. Claire frowned in concern.

“So, what are you going to do, Kisaragi Hayato?”

“Even if it’s an unreasonable demand, it’s not like we can just run away, right—!”

Hayato turned toward the Trenta, stretched out his hand, and tried to form an E-Barrier.

“...—Ku!”

The dazzling beam of light struck the E-Barrier dead on.

The impact was so violent that an intense pressure pounded his body.

“Damn it, like this...”

If this overpowering beam broke through his E-Barrier, their bodies would be next. Were that to occur, not only would he fail to protect the airport, neither he nor Claire would be safe either.

A bead of sweat ran down Hayato’s forehead.

“Kisaragi Hayato, let me help you.”

He was surprised by the voice.

“I’ll pour my Energy in as well and strength your barrier. That should be enough to ward off the attack!”

“But you don’t have much Energy left...”

“It’s not like I don’t have any left at all. If we do this together... it can be done—!”

Claire extended her left hand to join Hayato’s right, and let her remaining Energy flow into his E-Barrier.

“Here we go, Kisaragi Hayato!”

“...R-Right—!”

Hayato, too, let his Energy flow into the E-Barrier without stopping.

Thereupon, the enemy’s barrage was deflected into the sky on one side, and into the sea on the other.

“We did it, didn’t we?”

Claire smiled.

“Thank you. We’re safe thanks to Prez.”

“I-I didn’t really try to save you or anything. I did this to protect the airport—!”

Bashfully, Claire rebutted him forcefully as a large quantity of sweat ran down her face.

“...You’re pretty much running on empty now, I guess?”

“Yes. Although it’s not to the point that I can’t maintain my weapon, it’s a fact that I’m at my limit.”

Having mostly spent what Energy remained to her on reinforcing the E-Barrier, she had almost nothing left. She leaned against him.

“Sorry, it’s because I was worthless...”

“Speaking of which, I wonder if you couldn’t soon land... T-That hand has been touching my behind since earlier...”

“UWA— Sorry—!”

Hayato landed in a hurry. Assaulting the Trenta from the sky with her floating batteries, Emil cut in.

“You know, Hayato... You and the Prez sure have an amazing mood going on since earlier...”

Her voice, for some reason, could be seen as testy.

“Amazing mood... what are you talking about...”

“Emil Crossford, don’t get distracted!” a frantic Erika cried out over the Vital Ring.

“Eh...?”

Emil suddenly realized that the Trenta had been targeting her with its scissor-hands.

“Damn it——”

Her attacks had been intended to impede the Trenta’s movements, but her aerial position had instead backfired on her.

In this situation, it would be difficult to execute split-second evasive maneuvers.

“EMILIA—!”

Hayato shouted her real name without thinking.

The memory from ten years ago – when Emil had been attacked by a Savage, leaving a wound on her chest – crossed his mind.

Emil, of course, did not have the opportunity to protest.

Claire and the others observed Emil’s predicament in spellbound horror, lacking the presence of mind to process what had otherwise just occurred.

“Crap—!”

With a burst of Energy, Emil managed to evade the downward path of its pincer-claw by the skin of her teeth.

However, the pincers of its other hand closed in inescapably.

“There’s nothing I can do, huh...”

[Arms Shroud], which covered Emil’s body, was already thin, and depleting yet further still. As the Energy levels within her body declined, it was unable to produce the particles necessary to restore itself.

Simply put, due to its Energy consumption, were [Arms Shroud] to be used once – perhaps twice or, at most, thrice – more to generate weapons, it would no longer be sufficient to cover her chest.

Her identity as a girl would then be exposed. Far more worrisome still was the possibility of suffering a fatal wound without the protection it offered.

“...—KUU!”

Emil formed a pair of shields out of [Arms Shroud] to defend against the Trenta’s offensive, but it was futile.

In order to minimize Energy consumption, she’d purposely made them thin and small.

The shields were knocked away by the pincered claw before fading into nothingness.

...Shit!

Emil frantically twisted her body in an attempt to dodge the incoming blow, hoping to at least avoid a direct hit.

Nonetheless...

TEAR—!

The sound of tearing resounded near her chest.

“...Th- OH NO—?!”

The tips of the Trenta’s pincers found their way to her Variable Suit, tearing it around her chest. Emil’s breasts, the proof of her femininity, spilled out of her Suit.



“.....—!”

Flustered, she covered her breasts with one hand, but there were more pressing concerns.

The enemy's other hand was targeting her as well.

If this goes on, I'll be hit...

She couldn't use shields to guard again. With what Energy she had left to her, it would only result in a repeat of her earlier misfortune.

...What should I do?

Her enemy, of course, wasn't kind enough to spare her the time to decide on a plan of action. With neither hesitation nor mercy, the Trenta swung its arm down. Simultaneously, a black shadow materialized before her.

“Haya... to...?”

Hayato had thrown himself into the air with Energy and, extending [Hien] horizontally, blocked the oncoming pincered claw of the Trenta, preventing it from reaching Emil.

“Run, Emil—!”

Hayato roared from behind clenched teeth.

“But then, you'll...”

Even for Hayato, holding back the Trenta's arm was no simple feat.

Indeed, the arm with which Hayato gripped [Hien] was trembling.

“It's fine, just go—!”

As Hayato yelled again...

The Trenta pushed again with renewed force, blowing away both Hayato and [Hien].

“HAYATO—!” Emil shrieked.

Hayato's body, which violently impacted the ground, didn't even twitch.

“Hayato, are you alright, HAYATO—!”

No matter how many times she cried out, he didn’t reply.

——However, a trace of gold appeared within his eyes.

※※※

At that time, Hayato recalled the unique traits of a Variant: reacting to threats to one’s life, powerful abilities would manifest themselves.

It seemed like he was in just such a situation now.

When viewed externally, Kisaragi Hayato had risen to his feet, facing down the Trenta, and was readying [Hien]. More than that, he was now in Full-body Armament.

Despite being the individual in question, he felt as though he were no more than a spectator in the events ongoing.

His consciousness was hazy, and he couldn’t speak. The scenery before him grew ever more faint until it faded completely.

It reminded him of his duel with the president.

Caught in a similar situation, his body was again experiencing the same phenomenon.

Oh crap, like this...

He’d likely rampage just as he had during the duel.

He tried to contain it somehow, but in vain. His vision turned to darkness and his mind faded to white. His sense of hearing grew dull. All he could hear was the sound of his heart beating loudly in his ears.

Damn... it...

Desperately, he tried to hold on, but it was an uphill battle. The ferocious nature of that which was overflowing from deep within him had him in its grip, and breaking free was no easy thing.

Farther and farther his consciousness wandered—

“YOU CAN’T, HAYATO! GET A HOLD OF YOURSELF!”

Despite Emil’s frantic cries, Hayato’s consciousness did not return. His eyes were a glittering gold and his bestial bellows suggested that he was about to charge the Trenta at any given moment.

“...This is for Hayato... there’s no other way...” Emil muttered.

Her chest was already exposed, so there was no need to hesitate. It was far too late to hide her identity as a girl.

Hayato, please come back...

With a desperate prayer, Emil Crossford – no, Emilia Hammett – laid her lips over Kisaragi Hayato’s.

“Eh...”

Hayato felt himself slowly returning.

This is...

His vision was the next to recover, revealing Emilia’s face.

The feeling of a kiss reached him after that.

kuchukuchu sounded between their lips.

“Nn, fuu...”

Finally their tongues and lips drew apart.

“You’re fine now, right?

“Why are you... And, that...”

Hayato’s gaze turned to the chest of Emilia, smiling sweetly at him.

The tears in her Variable Suit clearly revealed her gender.

“It’s fine, I’m not hurt.”

“But...”

“I know what you wanna say. But, now’s not the time to worry about whether I’m a boy or a girl.”

Emilia lifted her gaze to glare at the enemy.

“That certainly does seem to be the case...”

Hayato, who had mirrored her in shifting his gaze to their enemy, understood the situation at a glance.

One segment of its head had opened and was shining; it was about to attack.

“...What do we do?”

“There’s no need to worry; you have access to the N-Barrier now.”

“I see, I...”

Now that she mentioned it, he understood that a great power was overflowing from his depths.

Given Emil’s words, he was likely in a state where his Variant abilities had awoken.

At any rate, he was now also enveloped by his Full-body Armament.

“...After you nullify its beam, seize the opportunity to attack with [Hien]. If it has your Energy, you’ll definitely, definitely be able to destroy its core.”

“...Got it.”

That much wouldn’t be a problem.

While Hayato was in the process of steeling his determination to succeed no matter what, the Trenta released its attack.

“HAYATO, NOW!”

Hayato deployed an N-Barrier to protect both himself and Emilia and blocked the attack.

As planned, its attack was completely neutralized.

“Right!”

Now he had to press the attack.

Continuing with the outlined strategy, Hayato leapt off the ground and closed in on his target.



The Trenta aimed at Hayato and loosed another burst, but Hayato was unharmed due to the N-Barrier being deployed.

Passing through the flash, he drew near the Trenta. Augustly raising [Hien] high above his head, his Energy streamed into it, causing it to shine with a brilliant, bluish-white light.

It expanded continuously until eventually reaching a size on par with the Trenta.

“Goooooooooooooo—!”

Hayato slashed [Hien], filled with to the brim with his Energy, at his target.

“That should decide it, shouldn’t it?” Charlotte mumbled from her observation point aboard the WL-03.

Following her words was a blinding flash.

[Hien], empowered by Energy, tore through the Shelter and the core with impunity, completely cleaving through the steel carapace.

The Trenta’s body collapsed, bisected, falling to the ground with a thunderous rumble.

The core, which had lost its light, and was now turning a reddish-brown, was smashed to bits.

From the Trenta’s colossal carcass, a vast ocean of fluorescent liquid flowed, collecting in a large pool on the ground.

Standing there was Hayato, panting heavily. [Hien] and its master had regained their usual appearance.

“You did it, Hayato!”

Calling out to him, Emil embraced Hayato.

“With that, it’s over, right...”

“Yep, we... Hayato defeated it.”

“I see...”

As a look of relief came upon his face, his legs began to shake.

On top of having exhausted his Energy in the attack just now, the side effects of his Variant abilities had begun to present themselves, leaving him in no condition to be left alone.

“...Hayato, are you alright?”

“I am... isn’t what I should be saying right now, is it...?”

“...Jeez.”

Hayato, who looked ready to crumple at any moment, was quickly embraced by Emilia.

“Sorry, I’m causing problems for you again.”

“You did well, so there’s nothing to apologize for. You properly used your Variant abilities and finished off the Trenta.”

“It’s also thanks to you that we were able to do it.”

As he said that, Hayato remembered the kiss; his body was burning up. The president interrupted his thoughts by interjecting with a question.

“What exactly is a Variant...?”

The voice drew Hayato and Emilia’s attention to Claire, standing near them, her cheeks twitching in agitation. Behind her stood Erika.

“A-And, Emil Crossford, w-what is *that*—! And e-earlier, d-did you and Kisaragi Hayato k-ki—”

‘That’ was, of course, referring to the two bulges on her chest which were now exposed.

“Ummm... could we talk about that later? For now, shouldn’t we celebrate the complete destruction of the Savage?”

“Do you think we’ll fall for that? That’s not going to happen—!”

As Claire tried to get some answers, a voice called out from her Vital Ring.

It was a transmission from Meimei.

“Claire-sama, everyone, can you hear me? I confirmed the cessation of all Savage activity just now. With this, the operation is complete. Really, thank you for your hard work. I’ll come get you now.”

Epilogue

“Between the citizens of the Zwei Archipelago, the concert staff, and audience members, there were only minor casualties – some injuries, but no deaths.”

Having been thus debriefed by Meimei upon their return to the WL-03, Claire heaved a sigh of relief and smiled.

“So I guess there’s a silver lining to all this. The fact that no one died is what really matters here.”

“The civilians in question have expressed their gratitude for your efforts on their behalf. Please look outside.”

“...Outside?”

As Meimei had directed, Hayato and the others looked out the window.

Though difficult to catch with the naked eye, given how small they appeared in the distance, it was nonetheless clear that a crowd of people were waving and shouting in their direction. They could not hear what was being said, but their feelings were conveyed, nonetheless.

“Seeing that really makes you happy, doesn’t it? After risking our all to fight, it’s really touching.”

It was just as Emil had described. His heart was warmed by their gratitude and he felt a sense of accomplishment. This was the first time in his life he’d experienced such feelings.

I protected these people... this place...

It made him happy.

“It’s precisely for times like these that we head to the battlefield.”

Claire’s muttered words penetrated deep within him.

Afterwards, Hayato, who had showered and changed back into his school uniform, made his way to the parlor beside the briefing room with Emil at his side.

The floor within was covered with red carpet, with a large desk occupying the center of the ostentatious room. Chairs circled the desk, with a saucer and a tea cup set before each seat.

“I apologize for the wait.”

The door opened to admit the student council president, Claire Harvey. It had been she who had summoned Hayato and Emil to this room. Erika Candle could be seen standing behind her, a tray with a teapot in her hands. They had changed into their school uniforms just as Hayato and Emil had.

“First things first, shall we have some black tea? Erika, the usual, if you would.”

“Understood.”

As Claire lowered herself into the remaining chair, Erika made her way from seat to seat, filling their cups with black tea.

“Do you always drink black tea like this after a battle?” Hayato asked, dumbfounded by the restful atmosphere which drew stark contrast to the life-and-death battlefield on which they’d fought the Savage just earlier.

“The return to everyday life first requires a lifestyle of normalcy to which to return, does it not? That’s why I take a break for tea after every battle.”

“Incidentally, this black tea is chamomile¹¹. The aroma calms the heart,” Erika informed them.

Savoring a cup of black tea after battle seemed to be a habit of hers as well.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have other matters to tend to——”

Erika, having finished serving everyone their tea, placed the teapot atop the desk and exited the room.

Hayato called out to her back, “How’s the other vice president doing?”

“If you’re referring to Ridi, her stamina and Energy are nearly spent, but her life is in no danger. She’s been placed in the care of medical staff who have come aboard the WL-03.”

Once they arrived back in Little Garden, however, her medical treatment would be continued in the hospital.

“Recovery from her wounds and replenishment of her Energy will take some time; at least one week’s worth of rest will be required.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but it’s good to hear that her life’s not in danger; that’s the most important thing,” Emil murmured, relieved.

Hayato felt similarly; Ridi’s condition had weighed on his mind.

“Now then, shall we get to the main issue at hand?”

Once Erika had left the room, Claire returned her tea cup to its place atop her saucer and, meeting Hayato’s gaze, opened her mouth to speak.

“And what would that be?” Emil asked.

“In truth, there are several concerns I’d like to address, but first of all, let’s settle the matter of the Selections team. Kisaragi Hayato – have you come to a decision?”

“A decision, you say——”

Her question caught him on the wrong foot.

“By that, I mean to ask whether or not you will join the Selections. I had supposed that you’d already made up your mind on the matter——”

“That’s...”

Claire was correct.

Having saved others with his own strength, and being thanked for doing so, made him happy. Moreover, thanks to Emil, he’d managed to control his Variant abilities in the battle with the Savage, which had been a major cause for concern for him.

That alone made him confident that he could see things through as a member of the Selections. Indeed, he thought that he would like to do so, however...

“By the way, Emil Crossford – I’d be open to you joining the Selections as well, should you wish it.”

“...Well... What do you think I should do, Hayato?” Emil inquired with a bright smile.

Doing battle with the Savage was, of course, a terrifying thing, a point which made him apprehensive.

Nevertheless, his sense of duty triumphed over his fears given that there were many others who sought deliverance from the Savage.

This feeling was surely what the president had meant when she had cited “noblesse oblige.” Furthermore, accepting this duty would keep him close to Emil. In other words, there weren’t any problems. And so...

“I’ll join the Selections.”

“Then count me in as well.”

“Very well then. We can discuss the details tomorrow.”

Seemingly pleased, Claire’s face relaxed as she raised her teacup and finished off her tea.

Erika knocked on the door and entered.

“Claire-sama, we’ll be arriving in Little Garden shortly.”

“In that case, shall we end things here? Please make sure to get adequate amounts of rest tonight; do not be late for tomorrow’s lessons. Oh, and one last thing——”

Responding to Erika’s announcement, Claire rose and turned to Emil.

“Emil – no, *Emilia Hammett*. You are to join us in the student council room and clarify your circumstances.”

“I guess I knew that was coming...”

Emilia Hammett, she who had disguised herself as Emil Crossford, sighed heavily, her shoulders drooping.

※※※

“Nii-san—!”

Disembarking from the WL-03, the moment Hayato set foot on Little Garden’s airfield grounds, he heard Karen shout.

Unsteadily, she rose from her wheelchair and, eyes brimming with tears, dove into her brother’s chest.

“Wha... Are you alright getting up like this?”

“If it’s just for a little while... I’ll... be fine...” Karen answered, soaking his uniform with her tears as she sniffled.

“Anyway, Nii-san. You said you wouldn’t be fighting...”

“You know what I was doing?”

Karen nodded.

“When Karen got back to the hospital, my fortune-telling showed an ill omen, so I asked Miharu for a favor and she looked into it for me. When I heard that you’d gone to battle, I...”

Turning, he saw Kashiwagi Miharu, Karen’s supervisory nurse, standing behind Karen’s wheelchair. She had likely escorted Karen here.

“I apologize. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

Hayato stroked his sister’s head as she sobbed into his chest. At long last, Karen raised her head.

“...Then show it.”

“Eh...?”

She couldn’t mean...

“Show you’re sorry for making me worry.”

Karen closed her eyes, and proffered her forehead. As he’d feared, Karen was demanding a kiss on her forehead.

“...I get it already...”

There was no denying that he’d made her worry. That was reason enough to humor her. With that in mind, he leaned in and planted a kiss on her forehead as he always did.

“Better?”

“.....Mhm.”

“Yeeesh, you sure are an affection pair of siblings, aren’t you?” Emil commented, her expression stiff.

Hayato came to the sudden realization that Erika and Claire had also witnessed the kiss just now.

Erika blushed and stammered, “W-What are you siblings doing?”

Crap, what did I just do in front everyone...

Hayato’s face was dyed a deep red, and the blushing face of Karen, standing beside him, grew redder by the second.

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Some time later, the freshmen, Hayato included, had returned to the dorms while Karen had returned to the hospital. Emilia, however, had not. Claire had pulled her to the student council room to discuss the circumstances behind her disguising her gender, her arrival at Little Garden, as well as the nature of Variants.

He, too, was a party to the Variant matter, so Hayato had offered to go as well, but Emil had refused.

The rationale behind her decision had been that the primary reason for the inquiry had been the disguising of her gender and subsequent entry into Little Garden; they were, as of yet, ignorant of the fact that Hayato was a Variant.

Seeing as Charlotte had accompanied her to the inquiry, the likelihood that Emilia might rage out of control was minimal, nevertheless, he couldn't help but worry about how Claire would judge things. After arriving back at the dorms and washing off his sweat, he returned to his room and laid down on his bed, the matter weighed on his mind all the while.

Is it really okay for me to not do anything...?

The invitation to join the Selections had been extended to her as well, so it was unlikely she'd be expelled. That thought came as a relief, but it didn't negate the possibility of some other form of punishment being meted out.

...Just what does the President have in mind?

As he mulled over the issue, his PDA rang; he'd received an email. Hayato sat up in a hurry and opened the email.

—*It's from Emil!*

The letter contained only a single sentence, "It doesn't look like I'll be back anytime soon." It offered no answers to the questions he was concerned about, such as what they had talked about or what would happen next. He fired off an email asking for further information but no reply came.

He determined to stay up and await Emil's return – or at least her reply – but perhaps owing to the tremendous Energy consumption that accompanied his Variant abilities, he was soon gripped by a wave of lethargy, which he was powerless to resist.

Hayato fell into a deep sleep.



“Hayato, Hayato...”

Kisaragi Hayato awoke to a voice calling his name. He felt a sense of weight against his body, as well something soft – something silky and fragrant.

...What is this?

With that question in mind, he opened his eyelids.

“Morning, Hayato.”

“Morni— Wait, what are you doing—?!”

At the sight of his roommate, peering back at him, Hayato reflexively cried out.

“What, you say... I’m waking you up.”

“That’s not what I meant! Your clothes, your clothes!”

Emil wasn’t wearing her men’s clothes. On the contrary, she was dressed in a frilly, fluttery negligee.

In other words, none other than Emilia Hammett stood before him.

“What’s wrong with my clothes? This is what I usually wore to sleep back in Gutenberg, you know? Charlotte bought it for me yesterday. What do you think – cute, right?”

“I do think that, but...”

It was terribly see-through. Although her cleavage wasn’t entirely exposed, what he could see was stimulating enough already. That alone was more than enough to make his heart race.

“More importantly, what did you and Prez talk about...?”

Unable to keep himself from staring, he pulled his gaze away entirely, distracting himself by asking about the matter that had consumed his thoughts since the evening before.

“This and that, but long story short, I’ve been given leave to continue my stay here at Little Garden. As a Bugeika student, of course.”

“As a man?”

“Yes.”

Emil nodded. That came as a shock to Hayato; he’d expected Claire to order her to attend as a girl.

“I see, so Prez gave you permission.”

“Charlotte persuaded her. The terms stipulate that as long as I continue my tenure as a member of the Selections, they will keep quiet about my being a girl. It’s not all good news, though——”

“What’s wrong...?”

Emilia’s expression turned dark. That filled him with worry.

“I have to leave this room.”

“Oh, that...”

That was no surprise. In fact, it was rather within expectations, really.

“So where are you going to live?”

“I’ll move into the room in front of this one.”

“Eh? Is that alright?”

He was honestly surprised. He’d have figured she’d have to leave the dorm altogether. This way, they would be able to continue to spend time together.

“It seems suddenly exiling a freshman from the dorms and ordering them to live on their own would be too much, so this was the result.”

“I think having a room to yourself all of a sudden would feel pretty strange already...”

All the other freshmen were two to a room; why were he and Emil suddenly exceptions?

“As a member of the Selections, I’m getting some special treatment. The other Selection members have apparently been granted rooms of their own

as well. Fritz has already been notified and I've been given the key to my new room. There's just one problem——”

“Which is?”

“I mustn't enter Hayato's room. And you must not enter mine. That's an iron-clad rule. If we break that rule, Prez has warned us we'll be punished...”

That seemed only natural. However...

“In that case, is it okay for you to be here?”

A question that seemed to naturally follow.

“My luggage is here, and I need to remove it, so this much is only to be expected, right? Plus, I wanted to check up on you once the inquiry was over; Charl told me I should.”

In other words, she seemed to have been told to check if the side-effects of his Variant abilities had kicked in or not.

“Hayato, you look like you're in pain. That's why I need to look after you myself, just like last time.”

“Like last time... You don't mean——”

“Ahaha, no, I don't mean kissing. But if you're hurting, I might change my mind; what do you think?” Emil teased, smiling mischievously.

“No, I... I'm fine. Just as healthy as always.”

“Ahaha, Hayato, you're blushing.”

Being told that, his blush deepened.

A knock at the door interrupted their banter.

Oh cra—?!

Just who was it?

Given the situation, it was entirely possible that Emil Crossford's true identity would be exposed. That set off a warning inside his head.

“Kisaragi Hayato, I’m coming in.”

That short sentence was enough for him to recognize the owner of that voice – the student council president, Claire Harvey. She more or less held the authority here. Opening the lock to his room, she entered.

If the other party was Claire, then he didn’t need to worry about Emil’s secret being exposed, but that in no way meant that he could feel relieved. She had no way of knowing Emil was currently in his room.

Given their current positions, it would look to a third party as though they had been sleeping together. When taken in the context of the condition Claire had emphasized earlier, things could turn ugly.

Unfortunately, it was far too late to do anything.

“Emilia Hammett, you’ve already violated...!”

Catching Hayato and Emilia sharing a bed, Claire thrust a finger in their direction.

Her body trembled with anger.

“To share a bed—! And that posture... h-how shameless—! You two need to be punished, no, expelled—!”

“President, please calm down! Lower your voice—!”

If someone overheard the president’s cries before the door closed, things could quickly go from bad to worse.

“S-Shut your mouth—! Anyway, y-you two hurry up and get off each other—!”

Shouting, the president approached Hayato and Emil.

“We understand already, so Prez, please cal—... m...”

Hayato, who had pulled himself away from Emil and was trying to get off the bed in a hurry, instead caught his foot in the sheets in his rush, losing his balance in the process.

“UWAA—?!”

He tumbled from the bed.

“KYAA—!”

The next thing that could be heard was the president’s shriek.

His vision shook and grew dark.

Lost in the darkness, he felt a sensation on his lips, something sweet and soft.

Don’t tell me...

He remembered this feeling from when Emilia had kissed him two days ago...

“WH-WH-WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA——!”

Emilia’s shriek pierced his ears. Opening his eyelids, Claire Harvey’s blushing face revealed itself to his eyes.

Raising his head, Hayato could see Emilia, trembling in rage as she stabbed a finger in his direction.

“H-H-H-HAYATO, YOU IDIOT—! YOU CHEATER—! EVEN THOUGH YOU WERE FLIRTING WITH ME JUST A MOMENT AGO, NOW YOU’RE KISSING PREZ—?!”

That confirmed it.

What he’d felt just moments ago had been the president’s lips.

“Another of my firsts, and you...”

“Ah, sorry about...”

“Before apologizing, first get off of me...”

“R-Right...”

Hayato rose to feet in a hurry. Claire sat up on the spot with her eyes cast down.

“That... was really just an accident, so please forgive me...”

“...I understand.”

“Huh...”

“I said I understand—! That’s why you don’t need to apologize or worry yourself over it—”

Her voice trailed off. This was a development he hadn’t seen coming; on the contrary, he’d thought she’d be outraged, as she had been when he’d touched her breasts during their duel. Instead, as she lifted her head, he caught tears brimming in her green eyes.

Emil seemed just as taken aback as Hayato.

“Prez sure is kind to Hayato...”

“Kind... What are you implying... This is—Well, this time, it really was just an accident, right?!”

“Even if you put it like that... Anyway, what brought you here in the first place?”

“I-I wanted to make sure that you had moved out as directed and deliver this Selections badge at the same time... B-But then you two were openly flirting...”

“And if we were flirting, what business is that of yours, President? Is there a rule that prohibits impure sexual relationships?”

“Not only had you already specifically promised not to enter this room, school regulations explicitly forbid girls from entering the male dorms!”

“In that case, how are you here right now?”

“I’m the student council president, so it’s fine. I wield executive authority over the student body.”

“So it’s only okay to flirt with and kiss Hayato if you’re the president? That’s dishonest.”

“Kiss... As you know, that was an acc... A-And it’s a sign of deep affection in Liberia and—— Kisaragi Hayato is the first member of the opposite sex I’ve ever kissed aside from relatives...”

Thoroughly embarrassed, Claire’s voice grew softer and softer as she spoke while the expression on Emilia’s face turned ever more rigid.

“Hayato.”

“...Uh, is something wrong?”

“...Won’t you kiss me?” Emilia asked, standing directly in front of him.

“Wha—, What are you saying at a time like this—?!”

“Don’t worry about that; let’s just do it. Your lips on my lips!”

Grabbing Hayato by the shoulders, her face closed in on his.

“Again, what the hell—?!”

“You were fine kissing Prez! So you shouldn’t have any problems kissing me too. Anyway, when you fell earlier it was likely the recoil from using your Variant abilities earlier, which is all the more reason we need to do this.”

“This is different...”

“It’s not!”

Objectively speaking, he’d simply tripped on the sheets in his scramble to get away, but Emilia wouldn’t hear it.

Actually, why does she look so angry?

Hayato didn’t get it.

“C’mon, Hayato. Let’s kiss. If we don’t act quickly, you’ll faint. If it’s for the sake of virus delivery, then it’s hardly anything indecent, so not even the prez would mind.”

“I would! And just what do you mean by ‘virus delivery’...?”

“Didn’t I tell you yesterday? Once a Variant has activated their abilities, their physical condition becomes unstable. The most effective

countermeasure is the transmission of the Virus carried within the body of a fellow Variant. That's why Hayato and I kissed during the battle against that huge Savage. Hayato and I have kissed on many other occasions too, you know?"

"Many' you say... Since when is three 'many'?!"

"Thrice?!"

Claire's tone attested to the loss of her cool.

"Anyway, Hayato; let's make it four times. I won't lose to Prez."

"I-I won't let you—! Release Kisaragi Hayato at once—!"

Flabbergasted by the pair who had locked arms while glaring murderously at one another, Hayato wondered how things had reached this point.

Deep within his heart, he came to the realization that the future before him was going to be rife with trouble.

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The top floor of a high-class hotel in the heart of Angel City, the largest city on the West coast of the federal state of Liberia. Through the window located on one side of the suite, one could gaze out from the skyscraper which, though it was the dead of night, continued to shine brilliantly. A scene so breathtaking that one could not help but give voice to their awestruck wonder.

However, one girl wasn't interested. Seated on a sofa situated amid a spacious living room, she was gazing intently at a monitor installed on the wall.

The young girl had a cute face. She was dressed in a frilly pink negligee and was clutching a large, stuffed penguin.

When it came to the content of the video displayed on the monitor she was so studiously watching, however, it didn't seem to be something a young girl would be interested in; indeed, it even seemed at odds with her cute appearance. Portrayed on the screen were the figures of the Slayers engaged against the Savage that had landed on the Zwei Archipelago in the heart of François territory in the South Pacific Ocean three days prior.

"Souffle, would you come over for a bit?"

As the girl raised her voice, a woman wearing a suit and thin glasses – the very picture of a businesswoman – instantly appeared from the next room over. As with her tidy clothing, the eyes behind her glasses didn't reveal the least hint of fatigue despite the late hour. Her trim appearance gave the impression that, the time notwithstanding, she was still at work.

"What can I do for you, Sakura?"

"The people that saved us the day before yesterday——"

"They were Slayers from Little Garden."

Even as she replied, Souffle, noticing what video was playing on the monitor, grew stern.

"Where did you get this?" she questioned forcefully.

Footage of Slayers fighting the Savage was never made available to the public. International law classified any such material and prohibitions against its display were very strict.

"It was uploaded to cyberspace."

Dangling her legs over the sofa, Sakura tilted her head in the direction of a PDA atop a desk with a snort.

Cyberspace was a construct that existed on top of the cyberspace. It was a service allowing for people all over the world to freely distribute self-made media such as pictures, videos, and music.

Simply put, the video in question had been recorded by a bystander and illegally uploaded. A closer inspection of the video revealed some rough edges and occasional jarring movement.

“On that note, what exactly *is* Little Garden?”

Souffle sighed. Sakura’s curiosity knew no bounds.

What should I do, I wonder...

Souffle debated whether or not to answer the question, but came to the conclusion that Sakura could find this information on the cybernet anyway. In fact, if she didn’t answer, Sakura would likely do just that.

“Little Garden is a military installation under the control of the Warslan Company, the world-famous defense contractor. It apparently doubles as both a forward base and a Slayer training facility.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know where Little Garden can be found, would you?”

“That’s a very worrying question, isn’t it?”

“If even you don’t know, then this place must be classified, right? Is it a military installation then? Would you be unable to find its location on the cybernet or a cybermap?”

“It’s not just a matter of not knowing its location; Little Garden is an aircraft carrier – something like a mobile megafloat. That’s why I have no way of knowing its precise location right this moment. I imagine it cruises throughout the Pacific Ocean...”

“I want to go there.”

“What are you——”

Souffle frowned in concern at the sudden demand. Unconcerned, Sakura continued her plea.

“Please, Souffle. I want to go to Little Garden; I want to personally thank the Slayers who rescued us from the Savage. That’s why I want you to take me

to Little Garden. We have some free time before the next recording after all."

Kirishima Sakura, the world-famous idol hailing from the Yamato Empire, pleaded with her manager, Souffle Clearrail, with a devilish grin on her face.

Translator notes and references

[1] 'Hyaku Busou': Lit. "One Hundred Arms".

[2] Had furigana of "Boat"

[3] 'Bugeika': Lit.: "Martial Arts Department". It will be kept like this, because there are some really nasty chained terms coming up, which would sound even more ridiculous when translated. Just replace "Bugeika" with "Martial Arts Department" in your mind and judge for yourself.

[4] 'PMC': Short for "private military company".

[5] 'Futsuuka': General department.

[6] 'Six Tatami': A Japanese measurement for living spaces. 6 tatami is roughly 2.73m x 3.64m.

[7] An onomatopoeia for growling.

[8] Sfx for cute form of annoyance/anger.

[9] 'Katemaki Curls': A hairstyle, as seen in the next illustration. Or see [here](#).

[1] Furigana display the Japanese text in English.

[2] The kanji reads "Undefeated Queen".

[3] 'Zanbatou': See [here](#).

[4] The kanji reads "Soaring swallow".

[5] The kanji reads "All-Enshrouding Mist".

[1] *Chamomile*: Black tea uses the leaves of the camellia plant, and is thus a "true" tea unlike chamomile tea, which is made from the chamomile flower (The katakana 100% read chamomile, though.).

Afterword

(placeholder)

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